

## The Virtue of Simplicity in *The Shepherd of Hermas*

By John S. Gibson

The *Shepherd of Hermas* is an important second century writing about a Christian, in Rome, who experienced five visions, twelve mandates (or commandments), and ten parables. It is a very long book of 114 chapters dealing with the spirituality of the main character, Hermas. It was so popular among second and third century Christians that many thought it should be included as part of the New Testament canon. In the fifth vision an angel dressed like a shepherd appeared to Hermas and told him, "I was sent by the most holy angel to live with you the rest of the days of your life." After Hermas asked him who he was, the angel said, "I am the shepherd to whom you were entrusted."

Hermas was a Christian who lived, on the whole, a righteous and godly life. The problem was that at times he committed sin and he failed to correct the sins of his children and wife. What those sins were specifically, we do not know. The book relates only the following to us,

Your children, Hermas, have rejected God and blasphemed the Lord and by their great evil they have betrayed their parents, and are called betrayers of parents, yet they have not profited from their betrayal. But still they added licentiousness and orgies of evil to their sins, and so the limit of their transgressions has been reached...and to your wife, who is about to become like a sister to you, for she does not control her tongue, with which she does evil. (Vision 2:6:2, 3)

In *The Shepherd of Hermas* the virtue of simplicity is emphasized as one of the most important virtues in the Christian life, and as we will see, simplicity for Hermas is the foundation of spirituality. Repeatedly, the book describes him something like this, "...Hermas the self-controlled, who abstains from every evil desire and is full of all *simplicity* and great innocence." (Vision 1:2:4) No less than 17 times the Greek word ἁπλοῦς (haplous) for "simplicity" or some form of it appears in the book. The significant majority of the time it referred to simplicity in a moral sense. The few exceptions are when it refers to a way of giving to those in need and is usually translated "generously."

H. P. V. Nunn wrote, "In Hermas we have a writer who was certainly acquainted with much of the New Testament, as is shown by verbal allusions to several books in it, but makes no direct quotations of any length." Therefore, just considering this word ἁπλοῦς, we may take note that it is found eleven times in the New Testament and only appears six times in the typical moral sense and all the other times regarding giving "generously." Two times it is found in the Gospels in the moral sense through the words of Christ in Matthew 6:22 and Luke 11:34. This Luke 11:34 passage in the King James Version is translated very literally as "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness." The New Testament Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest translated the first half

of the verse as, “The lamp of the body is the eye. When your eye is in single focus, sound, and fulfilling its function, also your whole body is well lighted.” Obviously, the idea of simplicity in this sense is seeing things singularly, in focus, not with blurry or double-vision. But still, this is metaphorical in that it is really speaking of a mindset or how one thinks. Does one think from a single point of view?

The word is also found in other first century writers’ works. For example, in his writing, *A Treatise on the Meeting for the Sake of Seeking Instruction*, Philo wrote in chapter 36, “But the self-instructed race, of which Isaac was a partaker, the excellent country of the mastery over the passions, has received as its share a nature simple, and unmixed, and unalloyed...”

There is, therefore, another way to translate this and in an even more positive sense. In the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, in referring to the noun, it is written, “Here, too, the meaning is a. ‘simplicity’ and again this leads to such value concepts as b. ‘noble simplicity,’ ‘characteristic of the psyche of heroes,’ c. ‘purity’ or ‘singleness of heart’”

This brings us to one of the other places in the New Testament where this word is used and in the moral sense. This is found in II Corinthians 11:3, “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. (NAS) Interestingly, we can even translate the word in reference to giving “with simplicity” or “with pure hearts.”

In *The Shepherd of Hermas* “Simplicity” is personified as one of the virtuous daughters of their mother, Faith. It is written in Vision 2:16:5, 7,

“And who are the others, madam?” “They are daughters of one another, and they are called Simplicity, Knowledge, Innocence, Reverence, and Love. So when you do all the works of their mother, you can live... Their powers are controlled by one another, and they follow one another, in the order in which they were born...”

It goes on to state that in 16:7, 8 “Their works, therefore, are pure, reverent and divine. So whoever serves these and has the strength to master their works will have a dwelling in the tower with the saints of God.” The tower mentioned here is the church. This puts simplicity with the other supreme virtues of a Christian.

In Mandate 2, like in II Corinthians 11:3, there seems to be an allusion to man’s fall in the garden where this virtue is actually commanded when his shepherd told Hermas, “Hold on to simplicity and be innocent, and you will be like little children who do not know the evil that destroys the life of man.” (27:1) The idea is that to be truly innocent, one must hold on to simplicity, having the naïveté of little children. This is the quintessential example of innocence.

Now, in this same Mandate 2, is the one time the word is used in the sense of giving where in 27:4, 6 it states,

Clothe yourself with reverence, in which there is no evil cause for offense, but all things are smooth and joyful. Work at that which is good, and out of your labor, which God gives you, give generously to all who are in need, not wavering as to whom you will give and to whom you will not. Give to all, for God wishes that from his own gifts, gifts should be given to all.... Therefore the one who gives is innocent, for as he has received from the Lord a ministry to carry out, he carried it out in simplicity, not worrying about to whom to give or not to give. This ministry then, when carried out in simplicity becomes glorious in God sight. Therefore the one who serves God simply, in this manner will live.”

As can be seen, this word ἀπλοῦς is not just used in the sense of giving generously but also so focused as not to be wavering but with singularity of heart. Then the word is translated as “simply” at the end of the passage. This not only pleases God but affects others who witness this way of living. The passage then states in verse 7, “So keep this commandment, as I have told you, in order that your repentance and that of your family may prove to be in simplicity—and pure, innocent, and blameless.” It appears to be saying, then, that if your household’s repentance is found in simplicity they are therefore pure, innocent, and blameless as you are.

The book is bringing out that when one’s life is totally lived in simplicity everything he/she does is pure and innocent. It is done with a life devoted entirely to living it God’s way. The mind is to be focused and, therefore, concerned about only thinking right thoughts as when Paul told the Philippians to think only on pure, righteous and holy things. Therefore, when people repent and turn to God, let them do it with all their heart, “Those who have fully repented therefore, will be young and firmly established—those who repent with all their heart.” (Vision 3:13:4)

Like living the Christian life, repentance is to be done with all of one’s heart. The doctrine of repentance and second repentance is the major theme for the book of *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In the second century those who committed gross sin as denying Christ during persecution would later seek reconciliation into the church, and oftentimes would be denied that opportunity. *The Shepherd of Hermas* deals with this problem and ultimately gives a resolution. In Mandate 4, chapter 3, this is addressed.

“Sir,” I said, “I would like to ask a further question.” “Speak,” he said. “Sir,” I said, “I have heard from certain teachers that there is no other repentance beyond that which occurred when we descended into the water and received forgiveness of our previous sins.” He said to me, “You have heard correctly, for so it is. For the one who has received forgiveness of sins ought never to sin again, but to live in purity....For those who have just now believed, or those who are going to believe do not have repentance for sins, but they do have forgiveness of their previous sins. So, for those who were called before

these days the Lord has established repentance....But the Lord, however, who is exceedingly merciful, had mercy on his creation and established this opportunity for repentance,...But I am warning you, "he said, "if, after this great and holy call, anyone is tempted by the devil and sins, he has opportunity for repentance. But if he sins repeatedly and repents, it is of no use for such a person, for he will scarcely live." (1-6)

The opportunity for second repentance was given, but that second opportunity was the last. This brings our idea of simplicity in to play in that when one is to repent he or she should do it completely, with one heart or mind, not wavering. One was to repent to the degree where he or she would not have to continue repenting. Therefore, this has to be a reason that simplicity is emphasized so, in this book.

There is an antithesis to simplicity discovered in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. It is first found in the book in Vision 2 where it is written,

After you have made known to them (his family) all these words, which the Master ordered me to reveal to you, then all the sins which they have previously committed will be forgiven them. Indeed, all the saints who have sinned up to this day will be forgiven, if they repent with all their heart and drive away double-mindedness from their heart. (6:4)

This Greek term is also found in the New Testament. It is the Greek word δίψυχος (dipsuchos). The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says of this word, "It denotes the divided man as opposed to the "simple" man (απλους, haplous)". It is only found in the book of James in Scripture. In James 1:5 it is written, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously..." The passage then goes on to say in verses 7 and 8, "For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."

This passage shows the antithesis to double-mindedness that, considering the original Greek, has to be noted. When James wrote that he who lacks wisdom should ask God, who gives to all generously, our word ἀπλοῦς (haplous), for simplicity, appears. So also in the New Testament itself we have the two opposites of this mindset. God gives to us in simplicity and singleness of heart, we likewise should not be double-minded.

*The Shepherd of Hermas* brings out a hopelessness regarding those who are double-minded lacking this simplicity. It first states in Parable 8,

But others of them were double-minded, no longer hoping to be saved because of the deeds that they had done; and others were double-minded and caused divisions among themselves. For these, then, who became double-minded because of their deeds, there is still repentance; but their repentance ought to be swift, in order that their home may be within the tower (again, representing the church). But for those who do not repent, but persist in their pleasures, death is near. (75:4)

He is not mincing words when he tells Hermas that for the double-minded it is unadulterated destruction. The book goes on to say,

...the double-minded and those who have the Lord on their lips but do not have him in their hearts...Such people are neither alive nor dead. They are, therefore, like the double-minded, for the double-minded are neither green nor withered, for they are neither alive nor dead. For just as these plants were dried up when they saw the sun, so the double-minded worship idols because of their cowardice and are ashamed of the name their Lord whenever they hear about persecution. Such people are, therefore, neither alive nor dead. Yet these, too, if they do not repent, they have already been handed over to the women who take away their lives. (98:1-4)

One hope, though, is held out. If the double-minded will resolve to turn away from their wavering and repent with all their hearts they may find reconciliation with God. Their state of double-mindedness must find simplicity and oneness of heart in their repentance. Therefore, in the middle of verse 4 of chapter 75 it is written, "For these, then, who became double-minded because of their deeds, there is still repentance; but their repentance ought to be swift..." The hope is there because, though they wavered being double-minded, when they heard of this "second" repentance, they responded without hesitation,

But some of them were double-minded, and some, being double minded, caused a greater dissension. In these, then, there is still hope of repentance because they were always good, and scarcely one of them will die....Still, they never fell away from God, but bore the name gladly, and gladly welcomed God's servants into their houses. So when they heard of this repentance, they repented unhesitatingly and are practicing every virtue, and are bearing their distress gladly, knowing the deeds that they did.... (76:2-4)

One obvious consequence of double-mindedness among Christians is that there are dissension and divisions. The shepherd told Hermas in this last passage, "But some of them were double-minded, and some, being double-minded, caused a greater dissension." (76:2) Likewise, it was written in 75:4 "and others were double-minded and caused divisions among themselves." This dissension could very well be referring to that controversy in the second century of whether there was even the possibility of second repentance for those who wavered in their stand for Christ especially in the face of persecution. Thus, the very evidence of such divisions in the body of Christ implied that this double-minded lack of simplicity was being manifested in the church and must be dealt with.

The book ends, though, on a positive note. As devastating as it was to be double-minded, it is that much more glorious to live in simplicity. Later on in Parable 9 it states, "...they (the believers) were always simple and innocent and blessed, holding nothing against one another but always rejoicing in God's servants and clothed in the Holy Spirit...The Lord,

therefore, seeing their simplicity and utter childlikeness prospered them in the labors of their hands and favored them in all that they did.” (101:2, 3) Then in 108:4 it reads, “

So I say to all of you who have received this seal: maintain your simplicity and bear no grudge, and do not persist in your wickedness or the memory of bitter offenses, but become of one spirit and heal these evil divisions and get rid of them among you, so that the owner of the flocks may rejoice in them.

With seemingly more emphasis than Scripture itself, *The Shepherd of Hermas* insists that simplicity is a characteristic of how Christians as individuals, and as a corporate body, should be and live. Therefore, Hermas was commanded to live in simplicity. But he was also to spread the message to his family and the rest of the church that they must turn from their double-mindedness, following a life of simply pursuing the will of God. Living this way, all will simply dwell in the house of their Lord forever.

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