

Restored Friendship

Lesson for April 23, 2023

Unit II: Experiencing the Resurrection

Scriptural Background: John 21:15-25

Printed Text: John 21:15-19

Key verse: *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”* (John 21:15, NIV)

By His sovereign grace, God can bring good out of our failures, and even out of our sins. J. Stuart Holden tells of an old Scottish mansion close to where he had his little summer home. The walls of one room were filled with sketches made by distinguished artists. The practice began after a pitcher of soda water was accidentally spilled on a freshly decorated wall and left an unsightly stain. At the time, a noted artist, Lord Landseer, was a guest in the house. One day when the family went out to the moors, he stayed behind. With a few masterful strokes of a piece of charcoal, that ugly spot became the outline of a beautiful waterfall, bordered by trees and wildlife. He turned that disfigured wall into one of his most successful depictions of Highland life.

Swindoll, *The Quest For Character*

In this week’s lesson, Jesus similarly restores Peter and lets him know how valuable he is and will be in the future.

Key Terms

1. **Feed** (verse 15) – To pasture; Spiritually, to nourish by feeding people the Word of God.
2. **Grieved** (verse 17) – To be distressed, in pain, vexed; “hurt” (NIV).
3. **Know(est)** (verse 17) – To come to know, recognize, perceive; ascertain; realize.
4. **Love** (verse 15) – To wish well to, long for; embrace God’s will (choosing His choices) and obey it through His power.
5. **Shepherd** (verse 16) – To act as a shepherd; to tend, herd; rule; govern; care for (protect) the flock.
6. **Walked** (verse 18) – In an ethical sense, one having conducted his/her life, lived; “went” (NIV).

Lesson Background

The timing of the lesson is post-resurrection. Simon Peter announces to the assembled disciples, “I’m going fishing.” Improbable as it may sound to our ears given all the goings on in this suddenly post-resurrection world, Simon Peter figured the fish would be biting and so, without a second thought, he collected his nets and gear. Out he went, and the others with him, to the Sea of Galilee. Seasoned with the sea, knowing the water and the currents like their own heart beat, they fished all night and still they caught nothing.

At dawn, they saw a stranger on the shoreline, but didn’t recognize him as Jesus, though Jesus knew them; this “stranger” called to them with a term of endearment, “children” (John 21:5b cf. 1 John), watching them as they plied their trade, one they had seemingly left behind. Then the stranger told them how to fish: “Throw your net out on the other side!”

They did so and they caught an enormous load of fish. Fish of all kinds. The symbolic significance of the number, one hundred fifty-three, is not clear, but the meaning of the story is not: the Jesus proclaimed by John draws in an inclusive and diverse meaning of love, acceptance and unity.

Moreover, it reprises two or three traditional stories of the disciples: the work of the disciples as fishermen; the more radical call to become fishers of people; and finally, the reminder of John’s Jesus that “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 21); and it shares similarities with Luke’s account of the disciples “recognizing” the stranger/Resurrected One in their midst when he broke the bread.

In the final scene of this text, is a dramatic exchange between Jesus and Simon Peter.

Lesson in Depth

I. Restored to Minister (John 21:15-17)

Jesus said to Simon Peter: After their breakfast Jesus spoke directly to Peter. Jesus had already met with Peter individually on the day of His resurrection (Luke 24:34, 1 Corinthians 15:5). We can only wonder at what Jesus and Peter talked about at that first meeting. Nevertheless, it was still important for Jesus to restore Peter in the presence of the other disciples.

Simon, son of Jonah: Jesus addressed the leader among the disciples as **Simon**, not the nickname he gave him (Cephas = rock) or *Peter*. This perhaps was a subtle reminder that he had not stood as a *rock* in faithfulness to Jesus.

Do you love Me more than these: Jesus asked Peter to compare *his* love for Jesus to the love that the *other disciples* had for Jesus. Before he denied Jesus three times Peter claimed to love Jesus *more* than the other disciples did (Matthew 26:33). Jesus wanted to know if Peter still had a proud estimation of his love and devotion to Jesus.

It is possible that *these* might mean, “Do you love me more than the other disciples love me?” It might mean, “Do you love me more than you love them?” Finally it might mean, “Do you love me more than you love these things?”. Some think that Jesus asked Peter if he was willing to give up fishing again to follow Him. In view of the fact that he has just come from fishing, it is very possible that Peter would have understood the question the last way, but it is ambiguous. In any case the point is, Does Peter love Jesus more than all else? Yet, Peter’s previous claim to a greater love suggests that Jesus referred to the other disciples, not the fish.

Jesus asked Peter not so that He would know – He already knew, and Peter was aware that Jesus knew. It was for Peter’s self-examination the questions were asked.

Do you love Me more than these... You know that I love You: Jesus asked the question twice using the word *agapas*, which in its Biblical usage often speaks of an all giving, uncaused, unselfish **love**. Peter answered Jesus using the word *phileo*, which in Biblical usage sometimes has in mind a more reciprocal **love**, a friendly affection. Some translations express Peter’s answer as, “I am your friend.”

Some commentators see no significant distinction between the two different ancient Greek words *agapeo* and *phileo* in this passage. Most believe that Peter was now more reserved in his proclamation of devotion. There is surely *some* significance that Jesus asked Peter this question twice, using the same ancient Greek word for **love**, and Peter answered twice using a different word for **love**. Peter responded with a word for love that signified his love for Jesus, but not necessarily his total commitment. This was not because he was reluctant to express that greater love, but because he had been disobedient and denied the Lord in the past. He was perhaps, now reluctant to make a claim of supreme devotion, when in the past, his life did not support such a claim.

“He is simply saying that his heart is open to Christ and that Christ therefore knows that he loves Him with the best love of which he, a sinful human being, is capable.” (Boice)

Jesus confronted Peter with love because he wanted Peter to lead the apostles (Matthew 16:18). But in order for Peter to be an effective shepherd, his overwhelming drive must exemplify supreme love for his Lord.

He said to him the third time: The two previous questions Jesus asked Peter in the presence of the other disciples were not enough to accomplish what Jesus’ wanted to do in the life of Peter. Jesus had to ask **him the third time**.

Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time: Peter understood the significance of the question being asked **the third time**. It was a plain reminder of his previous three-time denial.

Do you love Me: The third time Jesus slightly changed His question. He asked Peter if he did in fact have a brotherly love, a friendly devotion to Jesus (*phileo*).

Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You: Peter did believe that he loved Jesus (using the word *phileo*), yet he relied on Jesus' own knowledge of **all things**. Peter understood that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself.

Jesus didn't ask Peter, "Are you sorry?" nor "Will you promise never to do that again?" Jesus challenged Peter to *love*.

"Jesus Christ asks each one of us, not for obedience primarily, not for repentance, not for vows, not for conduct, but for a *heart*; and that being given, all the rest will follow." (Maclaren)

Feed My lambs... Tend My sheep: Jesus restored Peter in the presence of the other disciples by causing him to face squarely his point of failure; *then* Jesus challenged Peter to set his eyes on the work ahead. After Jesus asked and Peter answered, Jesus twice gave Peter an instruction regarding how he should act towards God's people. The idea was that Peter could demonstrate his claimed love for Jesus by feeding Jesus' **lambs** and by tending Jesus' sheep, Jesus emphasized that they were *His* sheep, not Peter's.

Here is the chief work of a shepherd. Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep." Three aspects of feeding are suggested here:

Feed my lambs: Teach the children. Do not wait for them to grow up. Teach children from the Word what life is all about.

Shepherd my sheep: The word means, watch over them, guard them. In Peter's first letter he says to the elders to whom he is writing, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, watching out for them," (1 Peter 5:2). Try to discern where they are at, apprehend the coming dangers, warn and guard them. That is the work of a shepherd.

Finally, "Feed my sheep, my grown-up ones."

The instrument of feeding, of course, is the teaching of the Word of God. Open their minds to the thoughts of God. This is the missing element in the church today. As I have been traveling about, working with the Committee on Biblical Exposition, I have heard stated at several conferences, "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed." That is true of so many churches. One reason why immorality is invading our churches -- even preachers are throwing over their marriages and running off with the secretary -- is because the Word of God is not understood.

People are not thinking the thoughts of God, not looking at life the way God sees it, but following blindly after the fantasies and the illusions of the world. What is necessary is the unfolding of the mind of God in obedience to the word of Jesus: "Teach the word." The weakness of the church flows from a famine of the Word of God.

For Peter, following Jesus would involve more than teaching, it would ultimately involve pain, suffering, privation, and death. This was historically fulfilled.

Jesus is saying that preaching and teaching the Word of truth in a mixed-up world like ours will call for sacrifice. It may mean living in primitive conditions, under difficult circumstances, and not feeling put upon, but privileged, to teach and to suffer for the sake of the Word of God. Peter found this to be true. He ultimately obeyed his Lord. He had said, "I will lay down my life for you," and Jesus replied, "You will indeed, not like you once thought, not in defense of me with a sword, but in the teaching and preaching of the Word. Eventually you will lay down your life for me."

But one more thing is involved.

II. Martyred to Glorify (John 21:18-19)

Verily, verily, I say unto thee: "Very truly I tell you," meaning "I'm definitely telling you the truth." Twenty-five times in the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the expression verily, verily to introduce a concept they here might have difficulty believing. This intensive expression emphasized that what was stated was true just as God is true. In the Old Testament, a person who might be doubted would use such an expression to insist he was telling the truth (Numbers 5:22).

Jesus prefaced these closing words to Peter with great assurance. What He was about to say needed to be remembered.

When you were younger: Jesus spoke of Peter's past, reminding him of his younger days when he had less responsibility and could do more as he pleased. Most of us know what these **younger** years were like.

When you are old, you will stretch out your hands: Jesus spoke of Peter's future, when another would bind him (**gird you**) and **carry** Peter to a place he would not want to go – a place with stretched out hands, crucified on a cross. It would be by this **death he would glorify God**. "He will be restrained, no longer the master of his own movements." (Morris)
Trusting that Peter understood what Jesus meant, this must have given him a great chill. *Peter, you will die on a cross.* John the Gospel-writer understood but wrote this many years after Peter's death.

Yet it also gave Peter *assurance*. In the crucial moment a few weeks before, Peter denied Jesus three times to save himself from the cross. Jesus assured Peter – **most assuredly** – he would face the challenge of the cross once again and he would embrace it. Like Jesus' death, Peter's death would also glorify God. Peter too would die by crucifixion. Jesus promised Peter that he would die in utter faithfulness to his Messiah and Lord. Peter has called Jesus, Lord, so Peter truly is no longer his own man, he will do the will of his Lord. Jesus here, tells Peter of the persecution that will come.

Follow Me: In this dramatic moment, Jesus gave these last words to Peter. Years before He called Peter to follow Him (Matthew 4:18-19). Now Peter knew that continuing to follow Jesus would mean a certain cross. Peter was once again challenged to **follow** his Messiah, Teacher, and Lord.

Lesson Summary

What does it mean to love someone? This is a question that has been asked throughout the ages, and it is still a mystery to us today. In John 21:15-19, Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him three times. Some people believe that this was a test of Peter's love for Jesus. Others believe that Jesus was just asking Peter this question as a way of showing His love for him. No matter what the reason was, this Bible passage is full of meaning for us today.

Peter was one of Jesus's closest disciples, and he accompanied Christ on many of his journeys and teachings. Despite Peter's faithfulness to the Lord, however, Peter eventually betrayed him by denying that he even knew Jesus during the time of Christ's trial and execution. This act of betrayal must have hurt Jesus deeply, as it echoed Peter's previous earlier denial that he knew Jesus during Christ's most vulnerable moments.

Given this context, it seems likely that Peter's continued questioning by Jesus in John 21 may be that Peter needed to hear that Jesus still loved him and forgave him despite his failure. And perhaps Peter needed the reassurance that even if he was unable to fully support Jesus during the difficult times, their relationship would continue and thrive after Christ's resurrection. Whatever the reason for Jesus asking Peter if he loved him three times, it is clear that this interaction was a crucial moment in Peter's journey as a follower of Christ. Indeed, Peter would go on to become one of the most powerful leaders within the early Christian church after this encounter with Jesus.

Jesus tells Peter to "feed my sheep." This simple command is a powerful example of the way that we are called to serve others. We are called to put the needs of others above our own, and to make sure that they are fed both physically and spiritually. This passage reminds us that obedience is not optional; it is essential. When we choose to follow God's commands, we are choosing to put others first. We are choosing to make a difference in the world.

No matter what challenges we face, or how much doubt we may struggle with, we can rest assured that God is there loving and supporting us always. Let us continue to place our trust in the Lord and allow His profound love for us to guide our actions each day. After all, as Peter would go on to write in his letter to the church in 2 Peter 3:18, it is only through God's great love that we can do "anything," no matter how impossible they may seem. So let us continue living each day with an unwavering commitment to putting others first and letting the goodness of God shine through us always. For through faith and love alone we are made truly strong.

Jesus shows us that love is a personal choice and a gift freely given – it is the giving of oneself to another person for their sake. Unselfish love is oriented wholly to the good of the other person for their own welfare and benefit.