

A Question of Love (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that as we hear from your word, that we would know more clearly how deeply you love us, and in response, you would help us to love you more deeply.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Good evening, everyone. Good evening. My name is Jeremy Graham. I'm one of the ministers on staff at St. John's, and I would invite you to keep your Bible open to page 907, John 21 that we just heard read.

We're going to try to make it through the whole chapter tonight. So when I was 13 years old, my dad let me drive the car for the first time, and I put it in reverse, and instead of putting my foot on the brake, I put my foot on the gas, and then I turned the wheel hard, and I backed that car straight out of the driveway, 45-degree angle, and smashed it into the neighbor's garage.

Yeah. The car was totaled, total right off, and because I didn't have a license, there was no insurance to cover that.

So I didn't get back behind the wheel until I was 30. Well, you know, breaking someone's stuff is bad enough, but it's even worse when we hurt a person that we love.

[1 : 4 2] We can hurt them by something we say or something we do, and we've all had this experience of hurting someone we love, saying something cutting or doing something that we almost immediately regretted.

We've all had someone do this to us too, right? We've been hurt. We've been crushed by a loved one or a friend. And the most excruciating moments in life are those moments spent wondering if the person you love is going to forgive you for what you did, or that moment waiting for the person who wronged you, waiting for them to say sorry.

Because we all fail. And John 21 is all about failure. It's the last chapter in John. Jesus has risen from the dead.

He's conquered death, and he's proved to everyone that's seen him now that he is God. And victory is good, but what difference does the resurrection make for failures?

Because John 21 is also about Simon Peter. And Peter was a man, I know many of you know this, Peter was a man who loved Jesus dearly, who had followed him for more than three years, a man who had boasted that he was never going to let Jesus down.

[3 : 0 3] He would never turn from his best friend. A man who had, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, had run away. A man who then publicly denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times.

He'd even said, he didn't even know the man. And then we're told, in Luke's Gospels, that when he denied Jesus the third time, the rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and looked right at Peter.

And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times. And he ran out of there and he wept bitterly. Peter was absolutely gutted by what he'd done.

But then worst of all, Jesus died on the cross that day, and Peter never got a chance to say he was sorry. He never got the chance to make amends. But then in the most dramatic turn in all of history, Jesus rose from the dead and he appeared to his disciples.

And so far, in John, he's appeared at least twice and Simon Peter has been there both times. Yet, not a single word has Jesus spoken to Peter about what happened that night. Not a single word until after the longest breakfast of Peter's life, here in John chapter 21, verse 15, Jesus turns to Simon, sitting beside the fire, and he asks him one simple question.

[4 : 34] He says, Simon, do you love me? It's the most important question that Jesus ever asked Simon. And it's the most important question that he'll ever ask you and I.

Do you love me? It's the question addressed to all of our failures. Not, what are you going to do to turn your failures into successes, Jeremy?

But, do you love me? And as we're going to see from this story about Peter, our answer to this very question, it determines everything else about who we are and who we will become.

It's the question at the very heart of the gospel of grace. Jesus' resurrection means that he has God's power and authority to offer reconciliation and recommissioning to all those who have fallen, to anyone who's failed.

He forgives our failures, our sins, and he invites us into new life in Christ with a new purpose for living. And that's going to be, that's going to be enough for us to try to unpack.

[5 : 41] So, I want to do this as we look at chapter 21 under two headings. Very simple. Number one, the question, do you love me? And number two, the command, follow me.

So, let's dive into the question, do you love me? And there are three things I want to focus on here. If you look with me at chapter 21, verse 9, page 907. Jesus tells us in 21, verse 9, that John tells us, sorry, that Jesus had built a charcoal fire on the beach with fish and bread laid out for breakfast.

So, why is this significant? Because way back in chapter 18, it was beside a charcoal fire that Peter had denied Jesus three times. So, this is a deliberate restaging by Jesus of that uncomfortable and painful memory.

Has anyone here ever smelled a charcoal fire? this morning they were cooking barbecue during the 11 a.m. service and the smell of the barbecue was coming in right into the service, right when David was preaching.

It's a deliberate restaging of that night by Jesus because smell brings back memory. Location brings back memories, don't they? Jesus has staged it this way on purpose but for the purpose not of rubbing salt in Peter's wounds but for the purpose of reconciliation, restoration, and healing because he's Lord of all places and all memories.

[7 : 15] He's able to act in healing and reconciliation over any mistakes or any grief that we bear and so he brings Peter beside that charcoal fire and he asks him the same question three times.

he asks him three times do you love me and he does it publicly. I don't know if you caught this in the narrative but this moment around the fire there's about there's eight of them around there and he has to do it publicly because it was in public that Peter had denied Jesus three times.

But there's more to this three times repetition than just because he denied him three times. It's also if you look with me at verse 17 it's when Peter when Jesus asks him the third time verse 17 he said to him the third time Simon son of John do you love me?

Peter was grieved because he said to him a third time do you love me? Peter was grieved. Why is that important? Because Jesus has led Peter to this critical and necessary stage in the reconciliation process which is called godly grief.

In 2 Corinthians 7 Paul teaches us about godly grief and he says actually there's a really common response to our sin and he calls it regret. Regret is when we feel bad about something we've done or at least we feel bad about the consequences from our actions but it does not lead to any real desire or wanting to change.

[8 : 58] There's no conviction of sin in us and therefore there's no desire for repentance. And Paul tells us that godly grief though is intended to lead us to repentance and repentance is a critical step in reconciliation.

So Jesus leads Peter by asking him three times he leads him deliberately into this place of godly grief so that out of his repentance can come forgiveness and therefore reconciliation.

You see conviction of sin leads to public confession of sin and repentance which leads to forgiveness. This is the Christian pattern of reconciliation.

There's actually something going on here that's way more significant than just Jesus bringing Peter back into the club so that he can be one of the mates.

Jesus is reconciling Simon Peter to himself because he needs to be reconciled now through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

[10 : 01] Peter has been reconciled now with God by the blood of the cross killing the hostility between man and God. So you see Jesus isn't merely restoring his disciples to just their pre-death relationship relationship with Jesus.

He's creating a new and a deeper bond between us and God through his death and resurrection. Because he's conquered death all the privileges of his reconciled relationship with his father are now available to us.

That's what he wants Peter to see. And it all comes back to that one question do you love me? That's the starting place for you and I. Not what have you done for me lately.

He doesn't ask us about the past he asks us about the present. It's not first about what are you going to do it's about the attitude of our heart. Because love John Stott says love for Christ takes priority because a forgiven sinner is the one who loves much.

So that's Jesus' question. And then secondly there's Jesus' command. Jesus' command follow me. And Jesus gives this command to Peter twice.

[11 : 20] First you'll see it if you look with me at verse 19. And then he gives it again in verse 22. And friends this is the primary command for all those who are prepared to say yes Jesus I do love you.

And so again I want to break this into two parts. First of all again Jesus is going to set the scene before he gives this command. He's going to set the scene by carefully restaging a scene for recommissioning his disciples.

What do I mean by that? You see verse 1 it says that the disciples are beside the Sea of Tiberias. That's just another way of saying the Sea of Galilee. That's probably how you've heard it before.

Because way back in the beginning of Jesus' ministry it was beside the Sea of Galilee maybe in this very spot that Jesus had found Simon Peter and James and John and they were mending their fishing nets after a really frustrating night out on the lake where they didn't catch anything.

And Jesus came to them and he said go back out and try one more time. And when they obeyed Jesus' request, his command really, you know the story maybe, their nets were so full that they were full to bursting they had to bring another boat to bring in the haul.

[12 : 36] That story is found in Luke chapter 5. But here we are in John 21 on that beach and Jesus invites Simon Peter, James and John to leave, sorry, pardon me, back in Luke chapter 5 the first time, the story ended with Jesus inviting Simon Peter, James and John to leave those fishing nets behind and become fishers of people.

He said, follow me and I will make you fishers of people. And for more than three years they left their business, they left their family and they followed Jesus. Okay, so now back in John 21, we find seven men fishing all night and guess what, catching nothing.

We see that in verse 3. And then we see that Jesus is on the shore, they don't know who it is yet, but he's directing these men, he's calling out to them and saying, fish on the right hand side of the boat, how could he know that from the shore?

Well in verse 6 that's what they do, they decide, oh what the heck, let's just go for it. And just like in Luke 5, a miraculous haul is brought in, so big that they can't even hardly pull the nets.

And it's at that moment, even from the boat, that John is the first one to say, it is the Lord. But of course, as always, it's Simon Peter who's the first one to act on it. And so he jumps overboard and he swims to shore.

[13 : 53] So the question is, why has Jesus restaged this similar event to what happened at the disciples' first call? Why has he done this? Simply this.

Because in a moment he's about to recommission them as his disciples, he's going to recommission them as eyewitnesses to the resurrection. And his miraculous provision of fish that day in John 21 is intended to remind them that everything they are about to do as evangelists and as pastors, as apostles, they can only do it in Jesus' name.

They can only do it in complete dependence on his resurrection power. That's what that miracle is meant to demonstrate for them as he prepares them for this tremendous task ahead when they're going to be sent to the ends of the earth to bring the gospel.

And then secondly, as we hear this command, follow me, I want you to see that Jesus' call is very personal. You see, Jesus' followers, they're not clones.

It's not like when you hear this command that you put on an army uniform and you line up and you march in unison. Because just as my love for Jesus is deeply intimate and it's deeply personal, so too my call to be his disciple and to follow him is also deeply personal and intimate and unique to me.

[15 : 24] And in John 21, we get a glimpse of what it looks like for two very different men to obey this command and begin to follow Jesus again. And that's Peter and it's John.

And I want to look at these two very different men and how their calling is going to be worked out very differently as examples to us of what it means to follow Jesus. So first for Simon Peter, his call to follow is described when Jesus, you know, each time that he says, do you love me?

And Peter says, yeah, you know, you know that I love you, Lord. What does Jesus respond each time? He responds with a variation on another command. He says, feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my lambs, feed my sheep.

He says it three times. For Peter, following Jesus is going to mean shepherding the flock. It's going to mean basically it's going to mean pastoring, which is another way of saying shepherding.

The church, which Jesus loves, it's going to mean feeding and tending the church through his apostolic ministry of preaching and prayer.

[16 : 31] And if you read the book of Acts, this is what you see. But there's more to it. Jesus tells Peter beginning at verse 18, have a look with me. He says, truly, truly, Peter, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted.

But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. So what's this talking about? John even gives us an explanation.

This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. It's a picture of crucifixion, this stretching out. Jesus says, Peter, one day you will be stretched out on a cross and you'll die as a martyr for the sake of the gospel.

Well, of course, that's pretty sobering news for Peter. And I think this is like a moment of dark humor, especially when you know that John wrote the gospel. We read in verse 19 that the apostle John is following behind Jesus and Peter.

And so Peter sees that he's following and he turns and he blurts out to Jesus, hey, what about this guy? Look, what about this man? And this would be a little bit like Jesus telling me, Jeremy, you're going to get absolutely beat up for the gospel.

[17 : 44] And I turn to him and I say, is Aaron going to get punched in the nose too? Right? It's not a very heroic moment for Peter. But Jesus' response comes in verse 22.

Jesus says, if it is my will that he, John, if it is my will that John remain until I come, what's that to you? You just follow me. Another translation would be, Peter, mind your own business.

Follow me. Because it's never a good idea for me and you, for any of us, to spend too much time comparing ourselves to other Jesus followers.

Yes, it's good to have mentors. It's good to have role models. But beware the temptation to either think that your job is just to be just like them or the temptation to think that your job is to make other people just like you as they follow Jesus.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us into a unique role that uses our gifts, our experiences, our passions. We'll come back to that in a moment, but I want to look at John. How is John's calling to follow going to be different?

[18 : 55] What does it look like for him to follow? If Peter is called to lead on the front lines, John is described by this word remain that I read in verse 22, remain.

Elsewhere in John's gospel in chapter 15, this is a very famous verse. I am the vine, Jesus says, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

That word abide is the same Greek word remain. So we know that John actually went on to live a very long life. He pastored in the city of Ephesus.

He wrote the gospel of John. He wrote at least three letters, one, two, three, John. And we just finished studying Revelation, the last book in the Bible. He wrote that as well. And he wrote that from a prison island of Patmos where he was imprisoned because of his faith in Jesus.

And so for John, it's a very different expression of what it looks like to follow Jesus. He's equally faithful to the gospel, but it's also going to be faithful to his character and his spiritual gifts.

[20 : 03] For John, it's going to mean remaining. It's going to mean abiding. It's going to mean serving faithfully until an old age. And my point is this. If you love Jesus and you're following him, it will look very differently for you than it does for me.

But John 21, it's not completely unique. It does give us two very important marks for all faithful followers. And the first mark is in verse 19.

The first mark is this. We see, we hear it when John tells us, Jesus said this to show by what kind of death Peter was to glorify God.

Because all faithful discipleship will glorify God. That's the first mark. For Peter, it was going to be through martyrdom. He's going to glorify God through martyrdom. For John, he's going to glorify God by living a long faithful life abiding in Christ.

Following Jesus, though, is always costly. But it always glorifies him. And then secondly, we see the second mark in those funny verses at the end, right at the very end of the chapter.

[21 : 12] You have to flip the page. And in verse 24, John is writing about himself here. And he says, this is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things and who has written these things and we know that his testimony is true.

Witness and testimony, those are translations of the same Greek word. It's the word that we get the word martyr from. Remember I was talking about how Peter is going to be a martyr. Well, whether it's literal martyrdom as in Peter or whether it's the long life of faithful witness and testimony which John is going to have, the point is that walking in obedience will always testify to the risen Lord Jesus.

And so some of you are thinkers and some of you are doers. Some of you are artists and some of you are computer programmers. Some of you just graduated and you have no idea what you're going to do next.

And some of you are still students. But if you love Jesus and you follow him, there is no vocation where God cannot take your passion and your gifts and use them for his glory and as a witness to the gospel.

So let's wrap it up. Back when I was 13 when I wrecked my parents' car. We don't talk about that very much in my family. But you know what?

[22 : 34] On that day, my dad's primary concern, this is mostly what I remember. I was in shock afterwards. What I remember is that my dad's primary concern was, are you okay? He took the car and he paid for the damages.

He fixed it up, he paid the bill, and he let me get my driver's license when I turned 16. And Simon Peter here, he failed in spectacular public fashion.

And everyone knew what he'd done, including Jesus. But the Lord Jesus tenderly led Peter to a place that reminded him of what he'd done.

But then, he asked him one simple question. Do you love me? Do you love me, Peter? And Jesus forgave Peter. He reconciled him. And friends, if you can say yes to this question, do you love me?

There is nothing from your past, however much it hurts, there is nothing which cannot be reconciled and healed by Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus' love for you is that deep and that wide.

[23 : 45] And in the power of his resurrection, Jesus has the authority not only to forgive sins, but also to recommission us. He calls us to follow him. And when we do, he leads us into new life, which is costly, and it's fulfilling, and it's joyful, and it will glorify God.

And this is what we were created for. And it all begins with one question. Do you love me? Amen.