

John 21:15-19 “A Savior for Failures”

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! That in spite of your failures, you can be vital in His mission.

Rather than seeing yourself relegated to the sidelines, just looking on and supporting others, left out of the action, God wants you to know that you can be instrumental in His plans to love this world back to life.

Even though you've failed badly and often. We're going to see that in John chapter 21. As we see, Jesus is eager for failures to become followers and then feeders of His people.

This is our penultimate week in John's Gospel. I've been waiting two years to use that word, penultimate. So there we go. You can look up what it means.

[1 : 32] It means next week is our last week. We're in a story where Jesus reveals Himself again to His disciples. Especially Peter.

He's helped them catch fish. He's invited them to breakfast. And now He wraps up the meal and sets His sight on the one who has failed Him in His darkest hour.

How will this go? John 21 at verse 15. The word of God that you might know Him. That you might know how to relate to the one who made you.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?

He said to him, yes Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, feed my lambs. He said to him a second time, Simon son of John, do you love me?

[2 : 35] He said to him, yes Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon son of John, do you love me?

Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, do you love me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.

Jesus said to him, feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this, he said to him, follow me. Jesus, you've called all of us to follow you.

And all of us here have failed in that. Especially me. And you know that. And so we ask your help.

[3 : 46] We all need it. We need your spirit to speak your word to us and to help our ears to hear and our hearts to be transformed. So please speak to us, we ask in your name.

Amen. Walt Disney was once fired from a newspaper job for failing to have imagination.

Oprah had her news show fail and got demoted early in her career. Michael Jordan famously failed to make his high school basketball team.

And we love those comeback stories, don't we? Failure turned to success. But that's just with people who've never really let someone else down, right?

I mean, they just needed to work harder and be better and no harm, no foul for the past. They could still be great, right? But we've let someone down.

[4 : 59] Not just someone. We've failed God. I felt that way as a pastor when people I was supposed to help were hurt instead.

When I realized my pride, my self-focus kept me from loving well the people God called me to love.

We've all failed. Failed God in different ways, haven't we? We've failed at marriage. We've been silent when we should have spoken about Jesus.

We've blown it with our kids. We've spent seasons of life living for ourselves rather than living for Jesus. We've lied because we thought that we could trust ourselves more than we could trust Jesus.

we've even repeated the same awful sins time and again after asking His forgiveness. Certainly, God has better options for His kingdom.

[6 : 14] I'll ride the bench. Certainly, God has better options for close relationship with Him. I'll just stand over here at a distance. Certainly, God has better options for fruitful ministry in His church.

I'll just watch others. I'll focus elsewhere in life. I'll be good at something else. I bet Peter can relate to those feelings you and I may have had.

After publicly proclaiming that even if everyone else failed Jesus, He would never let Him down, Peter did what? Well, He fell asleep when asked to pray and then He denied three times in one night that He even knew Jesus right as Jesus was headed to the cross.

I mean, this ought to be a pretty simple leadership decision for Jesus, right? We know how this goes. If He's any kind of good leader, we expect a leader to demand loyalty, to root out any traitors, to build a strong team.

We see it all the time, right? This is how a leader leads. Well, as so often the case, Jesus is different from what we expect of a leader.

[7 : 41] In fact, He is so good and so powerful that He doesn't have to draft the top performers for His team. Instead of running Peter off, Jesus welcomes him back in and He reinstates him publicly.

Instead of permanently sidelining you, when you fail, Jesus wants you on His team and on His mission.

See, Jesus makes failures into followers and He loves doing this. This is just one of many examples where Jesus encounters people who have messed up big time and invites them to follow Him.

Right? There's the woman at the well. Think of one of His most famous stories, the parable of the prodigal son. Think of the sinful woman. There's many, many in the Gospels but this one is especially instructive for us because we have seen as we've gone through the Gospel of John and we can relate to so much of Peter's story.

And it's helpful because Peter's been on the team for a while and Peter fumbled at the goal line in the fourth quarter.

[9 : 07] Peter, if you ever feel insignificant to Jesus or to His kingdom because of something in your story, I want you to listen this morning to how King Jesus operates so unexpectedly.

You might even expect that if Jesus was going to reinstate Peter, bring him back on the team so to speak, He would have to highlight His strengths. Right? Overlook some of these failures and kind of build up the good things that He's done, the things He's said over the years.

Yeah, certainly Peter's got some good things to include. Maybe they'll outweigh the bad. That's how Jesus will do it. He'll focus on that. No? Jesus very intentionally here makes Peter face rather than ignore his failure.

Look at all the things He does. He takes Peter back to his home. He meets him back in his old trade, fishing, and He calls Peter by his old name.

Not the rock, the name Jesus has given him, but Simon, son of John. And He brings Peter here in this story around a charcoal fire.

[10 : 28] The first time we read a charcoal fire mentioned, Peter is warming himself by it in the high priest's courtyard while denying Jesus.

Can't you imagine after that night that he remembers vividly how it felt, how it smelt? That night is etched in his mind.

This is the only other mention of a charcoal fire in the whole New Testament. Jesus brings him there and then Jesus asks Peter, do you love me more than these?

Probably meaning the other disciples sitting nearby. Do you love me more than they love me, Peter? Do you love Jesus more than these?

Don't forget your prideful boasts. Note Peter's humility in response that first time. There's no more than these in Peter's answer, is there?

[11 : 39] He knows. He's not better. But then the gut punch, you know it, you saw it when we read the text.

Jesus asks how many times? Three times. The third time we're told grieved or hurt Peter, Jesus, this is painful.

It's hard to face our failures, especially when we've let Jesus down. Yeah. Jesus replies, I know it hurts, but you can trust me, I'm a skilled surgeon.

I cut only to remove the infection. I hurt only to heal. See, Jesus has not brought Peter out here to shame him publicly, has he?

He hasn't brought him here to mock him or yell at him or kick him off the team. It's not what happens. He wants Peter to see his powerful forgiveness for all of his sins and failures.

[12:53] He doesn't leave Peter wondering, I remember all those nice things Jesus used to say, what would he say if he talked with me after my denial of him? After my abandoning him?

After my failure? How would he feel about me now? Jesus doesn't leave Peter there. Three times Peter denied. Three times Jesus restored.

See, if you deny your sin, if you hide it, if you seek to downplay it, how will you receive the blessed assurance of Jesus' forgiveness for that sin?

Maybe I can only serve if no one knows. maybe Jesus only uses the really the good version of me that I let others see.

No. Jesus says, you, the real you, the failed version, I'll take that one. I want him, I want her and he sees it and knows it all.

[14:01] He wants your real sin. And he knows what to do with it. just as he does here for Peter. I think a beautiful way to see the reality of this forgiveness in the place of shame, the difference that it makes in our lives, is to look at Peter's response to Jesus in these two fishing miracles.

We mentioned this last week. This is a very similar story at the beginning of chapter 21 where Jesus fills up Peter's nets full of fish. Three years ago, when Jesus filled Peter's nets the first time they met, Peter recognized the uniqueness of Jesus and what was his response?

Get away! I'm a sinful man! Keep away from me, God! you know that feeling? It's different this time, isn't it?

This time after seeing Jesus suffer and die for his sins, the risen Jesus fills Peter's nets and Peter does what as soon as he knows who it is?

He throws himself out of the boat and swims to Jesus as fast as he can. I just want to be near him! Not get this guy away from me but how close can I get?

[15:20] Listen, does Peter love Jesus? Is the Pope Catholic? No pun intended here. This is passage about shepherds not about a Pope I assure you.

Some of you are wondering. Peter loves Jesus doesn't he? Get me near him! He is sure of it now. Jesus you know I love you. Some of you may be here this morning and you are wondering well neat story am I safe to come to Jesus with my failures?

I mean I have never been a follower of Jesus before and I have failed like Peter and a lot worse and more than three times. A lot of times I get around Jesus people and I feel shame.

if that's how you feel this morning I want you to listen to Jesus not to anything else. The invitation of Jesus is for everyone who will come for all who will believe.

[16:31] He doesn't deal with you according to the size of your sins. He deals with you according to the size of his forgiveness and it's huge way bigger than any of our sins.

So take it from Peter you can throw yourself on Jesus and he will not shame you instead you know what he does with shame he will take your shame and he will put it on himself and carry it to the cross so that you will be forgiven forever that's what he does with the sin and shame that you feel so that you but you can live now with purpose and significance with him because of his forgiveness for you you can come all of you all of us need a savior like that notice this emphasis in this passage what does Jesus ask Peter do you love me three times the same question yes I know the Greek verb changes but I don't read much into that for several reasons including that

I'm not that smart Jesus is saying do you love me notice what he's not asking he doesn't ask his top prospect how do you do in crunch time in the past tell me about when the game was on the line how did you do Peter he doesn't ask that question does he he's not focused on Peter's performance in the past or his promises about the future I know what I would have asked but Jesus doesn't ask will you commit to never failing me again Peter couldn't commit to that could he he does get it wrong again but no Jesus doesn't focus on either of those does he focuses on the heart do you love me see that's actually the real issue with our sin isn't it it's the place we really need forgiveness and restoration it's not just something we've done it's our hearts do you love me is the question

Jesus doesn't merely want some outward behavior modification for Peter he doesn't want him to perform better under pressure at the fire the next time does he he wants to know do you love me in 1st Samuel 16 God is looking for a leader to point his people to him and he tells us that while men look at outward appearances physical attributes resumes of performance God looks where at the heart not at past or future performance David the shepherd is a man after God's own heart but he will blow it big time as king right adulterer murderer liar but we read some of David's repentance together earlier in this service didn't we from Psalm 51 when David fails God it grieves him that he sinned against God why because his heart loved

God right David's heart already before Jesus came loved a God who would forgive him how much more should we on this side of the cross look at what Jesus has done and said if ever I love thee my Jesus tis now this is my story my song praising my savior all the day long right his mercy is more I can throw myself out of the boat and rush to him with a boatload of sins right my sins they are many his mercy is more amen that's our joy and Jesus joy is to make failures into followers after all that's the only kind of people there are right Jesus takes failures and makes them followers and when he does it he doesn't immediately remove all of our failures does he he doesn't take all of our struggles away but he does love to make failing followers into feeders or leaders if you prefer and you don't like so many

[21 : 18] F's those who feed his people followers become feeders followers become leaders with Jesus that may sound simple but that's not what we would expect notice the pattern though all three times here do you love me yes then feed my lambs take care of my sheep feed my sheep it's a similar idea the point is the close connection do you see it between loving Jesus and loving the people Jesus loves love that's how you're going to live a life of love with Jesus you don't do it in isolation somewhere on your own you do it with other people Jesus says living in relationship with me means loving my people my church he's told

Peter that he's going to fish for men Peter your daily life what you do every day will be about people that's the connection for everyone who loves Jesus love Jesus love other people so that's not just for pastors right it certainly is for us and it better be but I've told you before that in the most important sense Southwood all of you are pastors you're you're to pray for people you're to point them to Jesus you demonstrate that you love Jesus how by patiently listening to that guy in your grace group who drives you crazy because he always talks the whole time you show your love for Jesus by reminding your sister who is despairing of how much Jesus loves her by caring for the needs of the ones who have no one else to care for them

Jesus says that's when you do that you love me think how remarkable this is right Jesus finds the biggest failure around in the moment and asks him to care for what is most precious to Jesus now you would never do this I want to prove it to you I want you to think about you and your spouse going on a trip far away and you have to leave your kids with somebody your precious kids you have to leave them with somebody most of us struggle to leave them even with their grandparents you certainly are not going to find the person who has just let you down and disappointed you in the biggest possible way and say here will you take care of my kids you wouldn't do it Jesus is always surprising us isn't he Jesus having just bought his sheep his sheep right we don't possess them they're his he has bought them at the cost of his own precious blood right you gotta remember how precious they are to him he now turns to

Peter who has just abandoned and denied him and says you feed my sheep what incredible grace right if we didn't know that Jesus had promised never to leave his followers alone we would call him irresponsible do you love Jesus love the people Jesus loves and secondly love the way Jesus loves what I mean by that is that Jesus here is showing us how to love other failures because that's the only kind of people there are right we don't ignore sin we don't downplay sin but because we know that we can take sin to Jesus we don't shame other people we don't write them off give up on them never we don't kick them while they're down and sometimes the church of

Jesus has been known for doing exactly that God forgive us but Jesus says feed my sheep tend my lambs the words mean they're hungry and they need nourishment they're weak they need protection they're confused they need guidance even they're going to need redirection how will you know how to help someone who's like that you know Peter I've got the perfect plan love my sheep the way you needed me to love you love my sheep the way I have loved you and am loving you again right now you know who will know how to feed a failing follower a failing follower

[26 : 48] I told you Jesus isn't waiting for you to get your life together to have a PhD and publish a book before you can love his people he's calling you to taste his love and share his love he's calling you to drink deeply from the well of his mercy and then show other people where the well is he's calling you to experience his grace so that you have grace that you can express to someone else right around you today that by the way is why I think Jesus doesn't build Peter back up to leadership by focusing on his resume of success but rather by reminding him what he had no room to boast he had failed repeatedly Peter remember you've tasted!

your need for Jesus that's the thing you need on the tip of your tongue! Peter that's the thing you've got to remember as I'm sending you out to feed the sheep all of us then can do this because we all know what it tastes like to need Jesus don't we all of us must do this when you see your failure and you see your savior you ought to see an opportunity to help other failures see their savior amen that's how it works it's for all of us and while it is for all of us of God's people these south what are the kinds of humble servant leaders that you should look to follow that you should nominate and urge to lead this church I want to encourage you that you have many such leaders in this flock if you don't know that we're going to honor some of them after the service please join us none of is perfect but

I asked a group Tuesday night of elders and women's advisory team members the question that if you look down at the bottom of your sermon notes is the first grace group question printed there what situation or struggle in your life do you think will keep you from Jesus or from leading others to him there were many answers that came right away failures in the present or even in the distant past and the conversation as we sat there for several minutes became one of honesty and then of celebrating that God's grace is sufficient and that that was evident primarily because his power is made perfect in our weakness we got to boast of our weaknesses to one another because it made God's power great in our eyes it is a blessing

Southwood to have many in leadership who are like that and they're not all in formal leadership positions but we need leaders like that you need leaders who know their weakness and their savior then they'll love their savior and his weak sheep right that's the kind of leaders God gives his church and when one of them fails to exercise the appropriate tenderness and grace because we will fail and Peter did fail again we can point that one back to the good shepherd who never fails to love like that Jesus loves to make failures into followers and then into feeders because they come humbly to the Savior and learn to love the way Jesus loves finally we're to love to the extent Jesus loves Jesus repeats the command doesn't he keep doing it never stop loving

Jesus or his sheep even when it costs you feed my sheep by the way Peter on that topic that will cost you truly truly I say to you verse 18 when you were young you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go this he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God and after saying this he said to him follow!

[31 : 29] me follow me Jesus says all the way to the cross we believe Peter was crucified under the reign of the emperor Nero that's a difficult message to hear for sure isn't it let's not minimize the horror of the cross and to be told that that's coming at the end of your life but let's also not miss what what Peter is being told here what could possibly be more restorative to your heart and to leadership in Jesus' church than to be told that you would be crucified like Jesus it sounds awful and it is at some level but Peter knows it's actually the most beautiful thing to follow Jesus into that one would lay down his life for his friends just think about what's the message Peter you won't you're going to mess up at times

Peter but you're going to make it and eventually give your life up the way your savior gave up his it's going to be beautiful Peter and you're going to glorify God what hope for a failure right who would have thought it that night at the first charcoal fire Peter you're going to glorify God now death by crucifixion is a message specific to Peter but aren't we all told to deny ourselves to take up our crosses to follow Jesus doesn't he say that his offer is to lose our lives in order to find them in him and since Jesus says to all his followers that life with him involves losing life in anything else to love him to love his people his sheep means not loving the things of this world that's a challenge for all of us it should make us like

Peter count the cost but it should also as it did for Peter encourage us because when we think of carrying our cross it points us back to the amazing love of Jesus once again friends he went to the cross for you and me before he knew if we would be good followers or successful leaders he went

to the cross because he knew we didn't merely need a second chance to get things right but truly a second life with him through his perfect living and his perfect sacrifice see your failure is not the place your story ends your failure is the place that the love of Jesus begins to transform your story in in fact your struggle may well be the place where you see the full extent of Jesus love for you so that your heart is enlarged to the extent that it will need to be to love other failing followers in the story of

Les Mis some of you seen it recently Jean Valjean is a failure he's a thief! even after 19 years in jail he is cast aside as worthless by everyone except a priest who instead of shaming him for his repeated failure he's a thief again and he's caught red handed instead of shaming him and destroying him right then he shows him grace he welcomes him as he says purchases his soul for God with some silver candlesticks he's got a new life and this love like Valjean has never experienced this love transforms Valjean into one who loves who loves God who loves orphans and prostitutes and the poor and the voiceless who loves other failures others as he realizes to love another person is to see the face of

God he's seen it and he gets to show it and he sees it more my brothers and sisters you're not cut from God's team you're not you're not relegated to the sidelines by the powerful love of Jesus by the powerful word of Jesus by the powerful grace of Jesus you are in the game and in his game plan and on his mission in spite of your failures he has drafted you onto a team that is going to win that the gates of hell cannot stand against because it's led by King Jesus there are so many that are hurting in need of his love so many struggling around you in need of his strength so many failures like us in need of his grace but

[37 : 04] Jesus is with us follow him let's go pray with me Jesus you are calling us alongside of you to those who desperately need you just like us and so we know what that means and we know that there is bread for beggars like us convince us of it again today and convince us afresh that you intend to empower us by your spirit for a mission that's well beyond our capacity but it's not beyond yours and you're going to do exceeding abundantly!

beyond what we would ask or imagine! is at work in this church and we'll be sure to give you the glory for that we praise you in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org