

John 21:15-25

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 May 2011

Preachers: Greg Hendrickson, Ian Maddock

[0:00] Let's pray together, shall we? Father, we thank you so much that you're a gracious and compassionate God, that you're slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Father, thank you for the way in which these qualities are so perfectly demonstrated and embodied and lived out in Jesus. Father, I pray that we'd grow in our gratitude and our dependence on him and him alone here this evening.

In his name we pray. Amen. Please turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 21, beginning at verse 15. John chapter 21, beginning at verse 15.

These last handful of verses in John's Gospel. John 21, beginning at verse 15.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said.

[1:05] You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my lambs. Again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?

He answered, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, do you love me?

He said, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my sheep. I tell you the truth. When you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted.

But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you don't want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, follow me.

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is going to betray you?

[2:07] When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him? Jesus answered, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.

Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple wouldn't die. But Jesus didn't say that he would not die. He only said, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world wouldn't have enough room for the books that would be written.

And so ends John's gospel. We're ending our series in John this evening and it's a great way to finish up, is it not? Inasmuch as you'd be hard pressed to find more encouraging words, more comforting passage in all of Scripture than the one that we've just read.

This passage, it's all about forgiveness. It's all about restoration. The way Jesus forgives Peter, restores Peter. What we see is that at his core, God's a God who loves to forgive us, who delights in restoring us.

- [3 : 26] If we come away with nothing else this evening, come away with this, to borrow words from the book of Exodus, that God's a gracious and compassionate God. He's slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- So as John finishes up his gospel, the big idea of the passage is that God, is that Jesus is a forgiving God. But he doesn't just forgive us as an end in itself.
- What we see here is that he restores us. He forgives us so that we can then follow him. So our passage begins with the first of two main images that dominate chapter 21.
- The first of these images is that of fish. It begins with the resurrected Jesus and his disciples sitting around a fire. Verse 15, he tells us that they've just finished eating.
- Probably not all, but at least a portion of this enormous catch, a miraculously large catch of fish that they've just made. In our passage last week, John's really precise about how many they caught, 153 in all.
- [4 : 34] Now these men, Jesus' disciples, they were expert fishermen, remember. They were professionals. They made their living and it was a really hard living catching fish. If there were fish there to be caught, they made it their business to catch them.
- And yet at the beginning of chapter 21, they're struggling. Struggling to catch something, struggling to catch anything. Verse 5 of chapter 21, Jesus called out to them, friends, haven't you any fish?
- No, they answered. To which Jesus responds, throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish, we're told.
- And the thing is, this isn't the first time either something like this has happened. It's not the first time these fishermen have been struggling to catch any fish, nor is it the first time that Jesus has intervened in this miraculous way.
- The episode in John's Gospel, it takes place at the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry, during his post-resurrection ministry. In fact, one of the numerous times he appears to his disciples.
- [5 : 38] But the other episode I'm thinking of, the other miraculous episode, is the one in Luke's Gospel. And it happens at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He comes across these same fishermen struggling to catch anything at all.
- And just as he does here in John's Gospel, he provides them with a miraculous catch. And they're blown away. These professional fishermen, they're astonished.
- They're afraid even. At which point Jesus says to Peter, he says to this catcher of fish, fish, don't be afraid. From now on, you'll catch men. Now, that was three years ago.
- That was at the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. This fishing miracle, the call to follow, to be a fisher of men, to be God's instrument for gathering in his people.
- All of this happened three years ago. And you know, a lot's happened between now and then. All of these disciples, all of these followers of Jesus, his closest followers, in one form or another, they've all abandoned him now.
- [6 : 41] Peter, he abandoned Jesus, just as Jesus predicted he would. Jesus has died, just as he predicted he would. And he's been raised from the dead, just as he predicted he would. In previous days, his disciples, they've seen him for themselves.
- A lot's happened between these two fishing miracles. The question is, has anything changed? That seems to be the gist of Jesus' question in verse 15.
- When they'd finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these? In other words, after all that's taken place, after all you've seen, after all you've heard, has anything changed?

When I first came to you, you were fishermen. And I called you to follow me, to be fishers of men. Has anything changed? Have you changed?

Has your allegiance changed? Has your first love changed? Do you love me? Truly love me? More than these? More than these fish? More than these fellow fishermen?

[7 : 48] When all's said and done, after all that's happened, your old way of life, is it still your first love? Because that's the way it must have looked.

On face value, when Jesus comes to them, to all intents and appearances, it kind of looks as though they've moved on. It seems as though they've just returned back to their former way of life.

After all that's happened, after all they've seen and heard, Jesus returns, and where are they? Right? They're back at the Sea of Galilee. Back to their fishing boats.

And their fishing nets. And so it's as though he's asking them, remember that first fishing miracle? Remember when I first called you to leave the fish, leave your nets and follow?

Has anything changed? Has your first love changed? When you first began to follow me, was it just about the fish? Was it just about what I could give you?

[8 : 49] Did you just follow me for the fish? Or did you follow me for me? Verse 15. When they'd finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?

Friends, what about you? If you're a professing follower of Jesus this evening, are you just in it for the fish, so to speak? Are you just following Jesus because of what you think's in it for you?

Do you truly love me more than your career, your professional goals, your aspirations? Do you truly love me more than your old way of life? I mentioned there were two main images that dominate the final chapter of John's Gospel.

As we've seen, the first is that of fish. God's called us to be fishers of men. He's called us to follow him. And following him means being his agents, his instruments for gathering in his people.

First major image that dominates chapter 21 is fish and fishing miracles. When it comes to Jesus' earthly ministry, they're like parentheses. The first main image in this chapter is that of fish.

[10 : 06] But you know, it's not the only image. The other main image is that of sheep. And not so much catching them, of course, but in this case, feeding them, caring for them, nurturing them.

Which brings us to Peter's response. And then to Jesus' response, to Peter's response, some of the most encouraging words in all of Scripture. Verse 15, Jesus asks Peter, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?

Not once, but three times he asks him that question. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, now Jesus asks him three times, do you love me? Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?

Yes, Lord, Peter says. You know that I love you. To which Jesus responds, feed my lambs. What an extraordinary thing for him to say.

You know, there are all sorts of things that Jesus could have said, couldn't he? You know, he could have taken the chance to mock Peter. You know, make him pay for his rejection, his triple rejection.

[11 : 13] He could have refused to forgive him. You know, Peter, you've had your chance. You blew it. You know, there are all sorts of things that Jesus could have said. I wonder what we would have said.

Chances are we wouldn't have responded the way our Lord does. Jesus doesn't condemn Peter. When push came to shove, Peter's left Jesus for dead, abandoned him, but not Jesus, not our Lord.

How does he respond? He does the thing that comes least naturally for us. He forgives him. More than that, amazingly, he restores him, commissions him.

He doesn't just say, you know, I forgive you, but as for any future relationship, don't count on it. He restores him. Verse 16, again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?

He answered, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him this third time, do you love me?

[12:19] He said, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my sheep. After what Peter did to Jesus, surely he must have wondered if there was any hope left for him.

The way he betrayed Jesus, he must have wondered if there was any forgiveness left for him. Any prospect of being restored, used by God again. You know, maybe you feel the same way this evening.

You know, maybe you've come here this evening with lots of regrets, like Peter. Big regrets. You know, regrets that are weighing you down. Maybe in some way, publicly or privately.

Maybe you've betrayed Jesus. And now maybe you're wondering if there's any way back for you. You know, after what you've done, if there's any hope that God could ever forgive you.

You know, you're wondering, you know, if I can't even forgive myself, you know, how on earth can God even forgive me? Three times Peter disowned Jesus. If he'd done it once, that'd be awful enough.

[13:26] But three times? Three times in quick succession. Can God forgive that? When it comes to your sin, my sin, the sin we commit over and over again.

You know, maybe you're wondering, how many times can God forgive me for that same sin? You know, the ones I've vowed never to fall into again and then vowed the same thing and then again and again. Surely I've exhausted God's kindness by now.

Exhausted is His patience. You know, maybe tonight you're wondering, is God's grace an exhaustible resource? Does it have limits?

Can we betray Him badly enough or enough times that we can actually go beyond God's forgiveness? Beyond any hope of being restored? You know, Christians have been wondering, they're struggling with this for centuries.

Just to give you an example. An example from the early church, during the middle of the third century, Christians went through this period of terrible persecution under the emperor Decius.

[14:38] But basically, they were given a choice. Worship the Roman gods, renounce your allegiance to Jesus alone, or face the consequences. And many did. In the face of persecution, many did openly declare their allegiance to Jesus, whatever the consequences, and the consequences were terrible, oftentimes fatal.

Many did stand up publicly and declare their allegiance to Jesus. But you know, many didn't. When push came to shove, no matter how noble their intentions may or may not have been, no matter how much some of them might have wanted to stand up for Jesus, in the face of persecution, they were just like Peter.

They betrayed their Lord. And you know, this raised all sorts of questions, all sorts of dilemmas, especially when some of those people, when the heat had died down, when some of those people who'd renounced Jesus, betrayed Jesus, they then wanted to come back.

They wanted to repent and come back into the Christian community. And it raised the question, what do we do? How do we respond? Is forgiveness even possible for these people?

Restoration, is it possible? And you know, sadly, within the Christian community, there were some who said, no, it's not. Their betrayal, it's so bad.

[15:56] They've exhausted God's grace, gone beyond the limits of what God can forgive. In theory, God might forgive them on the last day, but we can't. You know, maybe you're wondering if you've exhausted God's grace tonight, betrayed Jesus too badly, too often, to be forgiven.

But friends, what does Jesus say to Peter? Do you truly love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I do, says Peter.

Three times, Jesus asks. Three times, Peter responds. And then three times, Jesus assures Peter, I forgive you. I forgive you.

And what's more, I'm not just forgiving you, I'm restoring you. I'm commissioning you. Go and be my representative. Yes, you've betrayed me.

Friends, every time we sin, we betray Jesus. But God's grace, His costly grace, grace that costs Jesus His life to give you, His grace trumps our sin.

[17:03] Every time it does. Where sin increases, God's grace increases all the more, as the Apostle Paul puts it. Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase, He asked by no means.

But friends, know this. If we take nothing else away from Jesus' interaction with Peter, go away with this, that our God is a gracious and compassionate God. Slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

And it's not just that He forgives and forgets either. It's not just that He sweeps our sin under the cosmic carpet, forgets about it. He deals with it. He's dealt with it, definitively.

In Jesus' death and resurrection, He's dealt with our sin. Once and for all, He's dealt with it. In His Son, Jesus, He's taken upon Himself what He didn't deserve, the just punishment for our sin, so that we can receive what we don't deserve.

Full forgiveness, complete acceptance with God. Friends, if Jesus can forgive Peter, He can forgive you as well, and He can forgive me. If He's willing to forgive Peter, He's willing to forgive us.

[18:13] If Jesus can restore Peter, Christian, don't doubt for a moment, He can restore you too. After all the water that's gone under the bridge between Jesus and Peter, the betrayal, at Jesus' greatest moment of need, Peter's betrayal, his triple betrayal, if Jesus can forgive Peter, if He can restore Peter, use Peter to be His ambassador, to be His mouthpiece, Christian, know this, be sure of this, He can use you too.

There's no sin that's too great for God to forgive. Should we mourn for our sin? Should we grieve when we grieve the Holy Spirit? Of course we should.

But that being said, there's no place in the Christian life for wallowing in self-pity, languishing in our sin. There's now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, says the Apostle Paul.

Friends, this passage is good news. Don't miss it. Don't miss out on it. God's ability to forgive you, His desire to forgive you, restore you, send you out in His name, it trumps our sin every time.

Not just some of the time, but all the time. So as I've mentioned earlier, the big idea of this passage is that God, is that Jesus is a forgiving God.

[19 : 40] And praise God for that. But as we've already begun to see, He doesn't just forgive us as an end in itself. What we see here is that He restores us, He forgives us so that we can then follow Him.

And we see this especially in the verses that follow, don't we? Peter's just been restored, but Jesus explains that the reason that I've forgiven you, restored you, is so that you can then follow me. The end of verse 17, feed my sheep, He says.

I've restored you. I've restored you at great cost. Now follow me, whatever the cost. Verse 18, He says to Peter, I tell you the truth, when you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted.

But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you don't want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.

Then He said to him, follow me. Follow me, says Jesus, whatever the cost, even if it costs you your life. And physically speaking, it will.

[20 : 44] For Peter, the cost of discipleship is going to come at the cost of his own life. And Peter knows that it will. Jesus has told him that it will. Back in chapter 13, Jesus is telling His disciples about His impending death, that He's going away.

Where I'm going, you can't follow now, He says to Peter, but you will follow later. And in typical Peter fashion, Peter blurts out, you know, why not now? You know, I'll lay down my life for you, He says.

To which Jesus responds, will you really? Will you really lay down your life for me? You're actually right, you will. But here's what's going to happen first.

I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you'll disown me three times. You can't follow me now, Jesus says. This is a path that I have to walk alone.

But just as you've asked, you will follow me later. He tells Peter this in chapter 13. He lays out His future for him. And now at the end of the gospel, He lays it out for him again.

[21 : 46] I tell you the truth, when you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted. But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you don't want to go.

Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. In other words, reading between the lines, what Jesus is saying is, just as I was crucified, Peter, your fate is going to be the same.

As he said earlier in the gospel, no servant's greater than his master, like master, like servant. If they persecuted me, they'll persecute you also. You want to follow me?

Then follow me you will, all the way to a cross of your own, which as tradition has it, is how Peter did indeed die in Rome. And Peter knew that this was coming.

In his kindness, Jesus had been preparing him for it, not just here, but later on as his martyrdom drew even closer. We get a sense of this in 2 Peter chapter 1. Peter reminds his readers of the truth of the gospel one last time and there's a real urgency there, more pathos than even, as is usually the case.

[22 : 58] The reason being that he knows that he's about to die, that he'll soon be putting aside the tent of his body as he puts it. How does he know? Because Jesus has made it clear to me, he says.

That was Peter's mature position. He knows that he's about to die. He knows that he's about to follow in Jesus' footsteps, more literally perhaps than he could ever have imagined.

And so in the meantime, now he's looking to make the most of these last precious opportunities to communicate the gospel. That's Peter's mature reaction to what it's going to look like for him to follow.

That being said, in our passage tonight, his immediate reactions, anything but. Remember, Peter's just been forgiven.

He's just been restored. He's just been called to follow whatever the cost. His eyes ought to be one place and one place only. And that's on his risen Lord.

[23:58] Fix your eyes on me and me alone is what Jesus is saying. Follow me. You can't follow me if your eyes are elsewhere. And yet, where is Jesus looking? Where is he looking?

He's just being called to follow once more and yet, verse 20, Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. This is the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who was going to betray you.

Referring to the Apostle John here. Jesus has just called Peter to follow him, to fix his eyes on him, but instead, it's as though this ongoing competition that Peter's got going with John kicks in once more.

Now, just as they raced each other to see who could be first to the empty tomb, just as they debated amongst one another as to who was going to be the greatest. Now, verse 21, when Peter saw him, when he saw John following, he asked, Lord, what about him?

To which Jesus responds in verse 22, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what's that to you? You must follow me. In other words, Peter, why are you so concerned about what happens to John?

[25:16] Why are you asking me that? You know, are you wanting to share his load? You know, rejoice with him at my plan for his life? Celebrate what it means for him to follow me as opposed to what it looks like for you to follow me?

You know, is that why you're asking him? Or are you trying to one-up him? More to the point, making sure, you know, he isn't one-upping you. Making sure he isn't stealing any of your glory.

Or maybe even making sure that he isn't going to get off lightly in this whole thing. You know, is that why you're asking? You're asking about John. Is it out of kindness?

Or is it out of competitiveness? And the way Jesus responds in verse 22, it very much seems as though it's the latter. What's it to you what happens to John?

You must follow me. Don't fix your eyes on him. You fix your eyes on me. Verse 20, don't turn around and look at him. Don't worry about him.

[26:17] Not in the way that you're worrying about him at any rate. Not in a competitive sense. Don't look at him. Peter, you look straight ahead. You follow me. Friends, if God's forgiven you, like Peter, if God's restored you, commissioned you to go out and represent him, as he has for all believers throughout time and space, not just these first believers like Peter, but all who've believed throughout the centuries, if you've been forgiven, cleansed of your sin, given a righteousness that's not your own, who are you following this evening?

Who are you praising? As for John, as for the author of the gospel, the beloved disciple, as he ends his gospel, John can't praise Jesus enough.

You know, all good things must come to an end as we say, but not when it comes to Jesus. There'll be no end to praising him. John can't say enough good things about Jesus.

Isn't that the point of the last verse of the gospel? Verse 25, Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world wouldn't have enough room for the books that could be written.

In his own playful way, what he's getting at is this, when it comes to following Jesus, living to praise him, there isn't enough time, there isn't enough space, there isn't enough ink, there aren't enough words to what could be said about Jesus to praise him enough.

[27 : 47] John can't say enough good things about Jesus, can't praise him enough. Friends, what about you? Who are you praising? Who can't you praise enough?

Who are you following? Jesus says to Peter, follow me. Don't turn around and look at John. Fix your eyes on me. Who are you fixing your eyes on this evening, friends?

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance, the race marked out for us, says the writer to the Hebrews. And let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

We want to follow Jesus? We want to follow Jesus? Jesus, then we need to fix our eyes on him. Do you notice how inclusive the language is that the writer to the Hebrews uses?

Let us run, he says. Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. God calls us to follow him, to follow him alone, but notice this, and this is where we'll close the season.

[28 : 59] He calls us to follow Jesus alone, but all the same, he doesn't call us to follow alone. Friends, the race that God's called us to run, we're not running it alone.

We can't run it alone. We're not designed to run it alone. We need one another. We need one another to bear one another's burdens, grief and loss and doubt.

When we're tired to help encourage one another to keep on running, when we see a fellow brother or sister staggering under the weight of sin to help them throw it off, to untangle themselves.

You know, just passively watch as they flounder and then trip over. Christian, God hasn't called you to follow alone, to run this race alone.

Jesus is our trailblazer. He ran the race alone. He alone ran the race alone. Crossed the finish line alone. He's run the race ahead of us and he's waiting at the finish line, urging us on.

[30 : 02] His spirit within us empowering us to keep running. We're not running this race alone. It's a race. But that being said, what we see in our passage here this evening, when Jesus says to Peter, Peter, don't worry about John.

You're competing against John. You must follow me. When he says this to Peter, what Jesus is reminding us is this, not just that we're meant to run this race together.

More than that, that we're not racing one another. As though the goal is to finish ahead of the next guy. Friends, God saved us to encourage one another as we run, to encourage those on the sidelines to join in the race, if you will.

He saved us to encourage one another, not to compete against one another. How do we make sure that we don't? How do we avoid being a discouragement?

How do we make sure that we're an encouragement? Only if we're following Jesus. Only if we're fixing our eyes on him. Again, Hebrews chapter 12, verse 2, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

[31 : 23] Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Friends, as our series in John's Gospel comes to a close, comes to an end, let's pray that we would fix our eyes on Jesus.

As we bring our series to a close now, all good things must come to an end. But praise God that there will be no end to our praising him in the new heavens and the new earth.

Let's do that now together, shall we? Let's pray. Father, we thank you indeed that a time is coming when all good things won't come to an end.

When we're gathered around your throne in the new heavens and the new earth, there'll be no end to the praise that we'll be able to give you. No end to the opportunities to declare our thanksgiving towards you for forgiving us, for restoring us.

Father, if there are any here tonight who've yet to receive your forgiveness, I pray that tonight, today, would be the day of salvation for them. Father, you've called on us to call on you while you may be found.

[32 : 38] I pray that none of us here would hesitate for a moment longer, that if we've already been following you for some time, that we wouldn't hesitate to fix our eyes on Jesus more and more, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Father, we thank you for him. Father, we thank you that you're a gracious and compassionate Lord, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

I pray that we would go away from this place, from this gospel, with our love for you enhanced, our confidence and gratitude towards you enhanced.

Father, I pray this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.