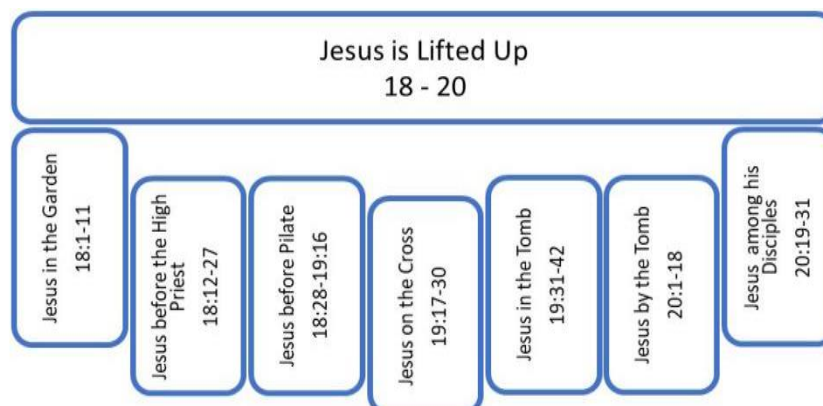


**Lesson 36: John 21 The Journey of Faith****Introduction**

John ends his Gospel witness with an epilogue. The conclusion came in chapter 20. Mary Magdalene, John, Peter, Thomas, all the disciples were confronted with the reality of an empty tomb and a risen Lord. They had believed and were challenged to further belief. Yet, these things were not written for them but for us. John lived his life inviting people to believe without having seen what he had seen. He ends the conclusion with the comment to Thomas, “Blessed are they who did not see yet believed.” Then he stated clearly his motivation for writing out his Gospel. John 20:30-31,

<sup>30</sup> Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

This concluding chapter emphasizes the call to belief in Jesus Christ, our Messiah, our risen Lord, the source of life. John does not stop there with this call to faith. He continues on with one more chapter. Where chapter 20 gives more focus to the act of belief, chapter 21 draws our attention to the journey. “You have believed, follow me.”

Saving faith takes you through the door, it puts you on a path. In this epilogue, John offers us Peter’s journey with Jesus as an example to help us think about our own journey with Jesus.

Let’s walk through the passage together interpreting as we go. Here is the introduction. John 21:1-3.

**Introduction: Apart from Jesus we can do nothing (21:1-3)**

<sup>1</sup> After these things Jesus manifested *Himself* again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will also come with you.” They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

The scene begins with a gathering of seven disciples. Three disciples are named. Peter has played the most consistent role throughout the Gospel. As usual, John mentions himself indirectly as one of the sons of Zebedee. Two others are just unnamed. This epilogue is paired with the introduction to the Gospel that we have in the second half of chapter 1.

There we also encountered a group of disciples and they were just beginning to gather around Jesus. Two of John the Baptist’s disciples began to follow Jesus. They gathered three more. One of the disciples remained unnamed. Peter is there. Nathanael is there.

This epilogue, when we catch the connection back to chapter 1, draws our attention to the reality of a journey. Three years have passed since that first gathering at the beginning of the Gospel. These are the same men, but they are not the same, are they? In those early days they did proclaim Jesus “Messiah.” And they claimed to have found the one “of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote.” But they hardly knew what they were talking about. They gave Jesus the titles of

Scripture without having experience or insight into the deeper meaning of the theology that they claimed. We discover later that these men did truly believe. That's going to come out through the story. But this is only the very beginning of that belief.

Remember how Nathanael was at first skeptical of any prophet coming from Nazareth, and yet, when Jesus merely claimed to have seen him from afar under a fig tree, Nathanael gushed, "You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus knew then how little Nathanael really understood.

<sup>50</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup> And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

When we first come to believe in Jesus, it's like putting on stiff, new pants that are too big for us to fit into. We accept as true realities we barely understand. Our faith may be real. But it is young, very new. And we need to grow into our theological pants. In part this simply requires time: time for growth, time for maturity. In part it requires breaking in our pants through some hard work, and some suffering and quite a bit of failure. Our pants become part of who we are especially after having torn some holes in them. And not the fashionable kind that come prefabricated, but the kind that come after long wear and hours spent on your knees. That's when the pants are really broken in. That's when our faith becomes broken in. These men speak truths that they have yet to grow into.

This Nathanael in chapter 21, at the end, now he has seen some things, just as Jesus said, "You will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." He has seen some things. He has rejoiced, he has been afraid, he has witnessed the cross. This Nathanael is not the same as that Nathanael who was sitting under a fig tree three years ago. He has been on a journey with Jesus. He has both believed and he has begun to live out that belief. And you know what I am talking about if you have believed in Jesus Christ for any number of years. You can think back to your original moments, the sweetness of coming to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And at the same time how naive you were in the beginning, or how much you needed to grow and to learn.

And that truth about Nathanael that he is a changed man can be said about each one of these here. They have all walked together. In some sense, their journey is similar. And yet they also have all walked in their own individuality with Jesus. Peter's journey with Jesus overlaps in some sense with Nathanael's, but it was also very distinctly Peter's. And his experiences and his personality and his successes and failures through this Gospel that form and shape him in a way that's different than Nathanael. And John is taking Peter's journey. We're going to focus on Peter as an emphasis here, as an example. Your journey is not going to be like Peter but we can still learn from his journey.

The disciples are at the Sea of Tiberias which is just another name for the Sea of Galilee. They were in Jerusalem in chapter 20 right after the resurrection when they were in that room when Jesus appeared to them and he let them touch the wounds in his hands. And we know they are going to be at Jerusalem again, they're going to be there for the Feast of Pentecost when the promised Holy Spirit comes.

But between those two moments in Jerusalem, right after the resurrection and at Pentecost, there is going to be a period of about forty days. Acts 1:3 tells us that Jesus appeared to them over this period. And we also read in Matthew 20:7 that Jesus had instructed them to meet in Galilee. They are where Jesus wanted them to be. He wanted them to return to their home territory where they had conducted so much of their ministry together with Jesus.

So, these disciples have gone there. And yet, they apparently do not know what they are supposed to be doing. And Peter, not being very good at just sitting around and waiting, does what he knows how to do.

[So], Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

The story continues in verses 4-8.

### **Lessons for the Journey (21:4-23)**

*Remember Where Fruitfulness Comes From (4-8)*

<sup>4</sup> But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” They answered Him, “No.” <sup>6</sup> And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find *a catch*.” So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. <sup>7</sup> Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped *for work*), and threw himself into the sea. <sup>8</sup> But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net *full* of fish.

I love this part of the story. They go back to what they know. They fish all night. And they catch nothing. After that, the last thing you want is for some old guy on the beach to yell out, “How’s the fishing? Did you catch anything?” They gave him a short, dismissive answer, “No.” It’s like they didn’t say, “No! Shut up!”, “No! Leave us alone!” It’s just, “No.” But like so many other guys who have not been out all night fishing, this guy on the beach has advice for them. And it is really stupid advice. “Children, throw the net on the other side of the boat.” Like the fish just hang out on one side of the boat. To professional fishermen it is such dumb advice.

But for some reason they do it. Maybe they are humbled and dejected. The one thing they really know how to do on their own without help from anybody is catch fish. They were catching fish before they met Jesus. They’re good at catching fish. And yet, they spend all night fishing and catch nothing. Maybe just to shut the guy on the beach up, they cast the net on the other side of the boat. And they catch so many fish they can’t even pull the net in.

John, our insightful, reflective disciple, recognizes immediately, “It is the Lord!” This has happened before. John does not tell us about it in this Gospel, but it is a well-known story. Everybody knows the story. When the disciples first met Jesus, the same thing happened. They were out fishing and Jesus said, “Cast the net on the other side of the boat!” and they all knew it was Jesus when he said it, and they did it because Jesus said to do it. And then they caught a ton of fish. And then Jesus told them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

Well, three years into the journey, after the terrifying and disorienting experience of the arrest and crucifixion, Jesus reminds them of their purpose. This is Jesus saying to them, “I told you that you would be fishers of men. I told you that you would be fruitful. I told you that apart from me you can do nothing.” Peter, our action-oriented disciple, dives into the sea. He is not going to wait for the over-burdened boat to struggle back to land. He swims to his Lord. When he gets there, Jesus has breakfast ready, verses 9-14,

*Respond to the Invitation to Fellowship with Jesus (9-14)*

<sup>9</sup> So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.” <sup>11</sup> Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, “Come *and* have breakfast.” None of the disciples ventured to question Him, “Who are You?” knowing that it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave *it* to them, and the fish likewise. <sup>14</sup> This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

It is not unusual for me to be asked when I’m teaching John about the significance of the number one hundred and fifty-three fish. We can come at that from several different levels. On the first level, the number simply draws us into a story that is real. You know, real detail makes you feel like it’s a real story. And the right kind of fisherman is surely going to count the number of fish in a haul too big to put into the boat. “We were out there. And we caught nothing. And he said, ‘Cast the net on the other side.’ And we hauled in a hundred and fifty-three fish!” You’re going to count it to tell the story. So, on one level, this is just real.

On a second level, the number of fish emphasizes the truth that we are the branches and Jesus is the vine. If the disciples are to be fishers of men, fruitfulness for them will depend not primarily on their knowledge, or their skills, or their hard work, but on Jesus. Apart from him we can do nothing. Abiding in him we can become fruitful in our labor to the glory of God.

There may be another level of importance to the numbers. 153 is a triangular number. You can google that if you want to know what it means. It is the kind of number that numbers people notice. Math people, people who like symbolic numbers would like at the number 153 and it would click, "Oh, this is one of those numbers." Augustine noticed it. I have read a couple of interesting papers on possible symbolism from the number. Scholars come up several different ideas on what the underlying symbolism might mean. But that's sort of a problem. When people have all these different ideas, then it's hard to teach what the symbolism really is because there are different options. When numerical symbolism shows up in a biblical story, the point is always going to be to support the story, not to convey hidden meaning. If you're looking for hidden meaning in the numbers in the Bible, then that's conspiracy theory. Really, you can make numbers show up and you can make them mean what you want them to mean and that's not Biblical truth being communicated. When there are symbolic numbers, like when the number 40 becomes symbolic or 10 is symbolic or 7 is symbolic, these are teaching us about the perfection of God. Or if Peter says, "How much should I forgive somebody? Should I forgive them seven times?" Well, seven is the perfect number. So, Peter thinks he's really gracious saying, "Should I forgive them seven times?" And Jesus says, "No! Seventy times seven." That's seven tens times seven. That's not only perfection but overabundance. You should be very ready to forgive people. And so, if you think about the numbers, the numbers add to the story. So, whatever this number means if it has symbolism, it is not something hidden that you should be searching for. It is most important that you have the main idea down, and whatever meaning it has, it's not going to detract from the story. So, we can just focus on the story. That's more apparent that this number makes the story real, and the fruitfulness. So, let's not get sidetracked by trying to go through what are potential symbolisms of the number. Let's just take it as a huge haul of fish that reminds us that we're not going to be fruitful in ministry apart from Jesus, but with Jesus we can do some great things.

Jesus set up a second scene after the miraculous catch of fish. It's a breakfast scene, a fellowship meal. These disciples are to be fruitful fishers of men. But we need to talk about something. What happens when they fail? And I am not talking about the failure to catch fish. It's not just when we try to do good things and we fail. What happens when they sin, or they fail to be faithful? That kind of failure. We are sinful men and women and we're on a journey with Jesus. And he is holy and perfect, he is fully committed to the will of God, and we are just so-so committed to the will of God. He is our king and Lord. What happens when we break trust with him? Is there a way back fully into his grace or are we set aside as marred, not so useful, a disappointment to our heavenly Father?

Jesus invites all the disciples to sit down to breakfast. He invites them into this fellowship meal. And there is a detail to this meal that is aimed specifically at Peter. When they came up to Jesus, John writes that they saw a charcoal fire with fish laid on it. A charcoal fire. That is an interesting detail. Why does John point that out?

A charcoal fire has only been mentioned only one other time in this Gospel. Do you remember where that was? Does that strike any memory for you? Where was there a charcoal fire? When Peter entered the courtyard of the high priest after the arrest of Jesus and he was asked whether he too was a disciple of Jesus. He saw a bunch of slaves and officers standing around a charcoal fire, warming themselves and he answered the question, "I am not." Then he went over to that fire and he joined the circle. And before the roster crowd, he denied Jesus two more times, as he warmed himself by a charcoal fire.

You know how smell can take you right back to a time and place in your memory? I think in the fall, when leaves start coming down there is a specific smell and I'm thinking of high-school football games. It just takes me right back to those memories. Jesus has created a charcoal fire and he asked

Peter to sit with him, in a circle with other men. This is a place of fellowship, but it is also a place of remembrance. Jesus is calling up the memory of Peter's greatest failure, his greatest shame.

Why would Jesus do that? Different human leaders bring out our failures for different reasons. A leader might point out your failure to shame you into better behavior. Parents do this, teachers do this, pastors do this. And that is often how we picture God. Even if we would not say it that way, we feel it inside. We use our failure to provide a negative motivation for us. We say it to ourselves in different ways, depending on our personality, but it's something like, "Come on Michael. What kind of a Christian are you? Look how you screwed up. You can be better than that! Do better. Be better, Michael. Come on!"

That is not what Jesus is doing here. He is not shaming Peter to motivate Peter. This is not shaming. Jesus set up this scene around a charcoal fire to restore Peter. Let's read verses 15-17.

*Receive the Restoration of Jesus After Sin (15-17)*

<sup>15</sup> So 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, "Tend My lambs." <sup>16</sup> He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." <sup>17</sup> 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 all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep.

What's going on here? I have heard a few sermons that focus on the different words for "love" that are used in the Greek. I do not think that in this instance the difference between *agapao* and *phileo* is the main point. John does not reserve *agape* as a special type of God love, unconditional love. Both Greek words are used to describe the Father's love for the Son in John's Gospel. John even uses both words when he is giving his self-designation of the disciple whom Jesus loved. He might use *agape*, and in some places he uses *phileo*. John uses them more as synonyms. And John enjoys using synonyms. In fact, just in this one passage we have two words for love, two words for knowledge, two words for the verb of caring for sheep and two words for the sheep.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than focus on the two words for love and some technical difference between those two words, I think it is better to focus on how this interaction is an example of Jesus' love for Peter. What is Jesus doing here? How is he loving Peter? And it's going to be tough love. Like the pain of a doctor washing out a deep wound or resetting a bone, Jesus is going to cause pain in order to heal. Jesus is giving emphasis to the denial, the three times that Peter denied Jesus. And this is a painful memory. One of the reasons for the painfulness of this restoration is the public nature of the denial. Peter's denial of Jesus was public in front of a group gathered around a charcoal fire. That public denial brought shame onto Peter. Jesus is now affirming Peter publicly in front of a group around a charcoal fire in order to restore his honor. So, the pain is necessary.

We can view Peter's failure through both an honor/shame lens and also an innocence/guilt lens. Both ideas are at play in whatever society we live in, though one society might lean more strongly to one side and another more strongly to another. Western morality tends to focus on law breaking. If you break a moral law as an individual, you are guilty of breaking that law. You feel you are a bad person because you broke a moral law. Justice demands from you some kind of punishment or penance in order that you feel better about yourself. In Eastern cultures, morality commonly takes on more of an honor/shame bent which relates more to the group. When you fail to uphold your obligations to the group, then socially you become an unfaithful person. That's how people see you. And that creates a sense of shame in you. You feel you are a bad person because you failed to uphold the obligations recognized by society.

Peter has failed here on both accounts. Denying Jesus, he broke the greatest commandment of all, to love God with his heart and mind and strength. He is guilty of law breaking. Denying Jesus, he has

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *Pillar*, 676-677.

also shown himself unfaithful to his master and to the whole community of believers. He is shamed as an unfaithful disciple.

As a Jew with a strong sense of moral obligation who lives in an honor/shame society, I assume Peter would have felt both shame in his relationship to society and guilt in his own internal understanding of moral law. He has got both going on. I also assume that we are all affected by both. We judge our moral worth according to the sense of approval in our group. That is more of an honor/shame perspective. You feel shamed because of how people view you. You feel like you have somehow failed socially or failed the community. We also judge our moral worth according to our ability to keep moral rules. And that is more of an innocence/guilt perspective. This is internal standard conscience that you're struggling with. Our upbringing and culture affect how strongly one of these perspectives may play out in our lives. So, one may be stronger than the other, but we all deal, to some degree, with both.

We do not know if Peter discussed his denial of Jesus privately during one of the previous times Jesus appeared to the disciples. Maybe they were all together. You know how you can all be together in a group when Jesus shows up and it becomes difficult to talk about personal, individual things. So maybe Peter hasn't had a chance to confess to Jesus and ask for forgiveness. It's not recorded, so we have no way of knowing whether Peter had had this conversation with Jesus yet in a private way.

Here Jesus is the one taking the initiative to restore Peter, and it's going to be both: both as an individual and also as a member of a community. As the denial was public before a gathered group and had become known, so too, the restoration is public before a gathered group.

The restoration began this way.

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, "Tend My lambs."

This cycle is repeated three times. Jesus will ask the question, "Do you love me?" Peter will respond, "Yes, you know I do." And Jesus will charge him to "Tend my lambs" or, "Shepherd my sheep." In each of the three cycles the parallel the phrases are pretty much synonymous. Jesus asks the same question. Peter gives the same response. Jesus delivers the same charge.

There are two slight additions to the language. The first is here in the original question. Jesus does not just ask, "Do you love me?" He asks, "Do you love me more than these?" That is an interesting question, "Do you love me more than these?" That's a question I would never ask one of my daughters. "Julia, do you love me more than Ana? Do you love me more than Claire?" Why would I ask that? Why would I encourage that kind of competition among my daughters? Why would I want that? So, why does Jesus ask that here of Peter? Does Jesus want us to think of ourselves in competition with each other to try to outdo proving to God which one of us loves him more?

No. That is not what Jesus is doing. The question is rhetorical. The question is getting at how Peter might see himself. "Peter, do you really see yourself as loving me more than these other men love me? More than John? More than Nathanael? More than Thomas? Is that how you view yourself, Peter? Did I choose you as a leader among the Twelve because you are better than they are?"

Of course, we all know that we're not supposed to feel that way, and yet whenever we have some kind of honor or position over other people, we feel that way. We somehow feel that we are chosen, selected because we are better. We are smarter, we are more faithful, we love more. But the question takes Peter back to the night of the arrest when Jesus was speaking to the disciples just after the last supper.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later." <sup>37</sup> Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." <sup>38</sup> Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

Peter had spoken out in front of all the disciples, this vow that he, Peter, whatever else all these other guys do, I will lay down my life for you, Jesus. That is how much I love you. Does he see himself

as loving Jesus more than others? Does he see himself as somehow better or more favored? Because he is the out one, the impulsive one, the active one. Does he somehow feel that means that he loves Jesus more deeply than maybe the more reflective John? Just because you're extroverted and you're out there, do you think of yourself as better than those who are more introverted, reflective, and quiet? Or if you're more introverted, reflective, and quiet, do you think of yourself as better than the more impulsive Peters?

Does God give you gifts or favor or position or opportunity or fruitfulness because you are better than other Christians, because you love more? Maybe Peter thought that before. I don't think he's thinking that at this moment, sitting across from Jesus with this group of men. You know, maybe in chapter 6, when he was the one that said, "Where are we going to go? You are the Holy One with the words of life." He was the one who spoke out when everybody left and that was a high point, and maybe he felt better then, but now he is the one who denied. Apart from Judas, he is the worst.

Peter does not answer, "Yes, Lord. I love you more than these." He does not frame his love in a comparison with the others. So maybe he has learned his lesson because he simply responds, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Then Jesus commissions him, "Peter, tend my lambs." Jesus accepts Peter's profession of love and then he gives him responsibility. That means so much. When you fail, and then your leader - he is not trying to shame Peter. He is giving Peter opportunity to state his heart. And then he is giving Peter responsibility.

Three times Jesus asks, Peter responds, Jesus commissions.

Why three times? Is Jesus requiring Peter to pay penance for his sin? You know, you denied me three times, to you make up for it, you have to confess me three times? No. No. This is because Peter needs his wounds washed away. This is not a payment of sin. This is not to satisfy the anger of God. Jesus is not punishing Peter. Jesus took the punishment for that denial on the cross. Jesus took the punishment. This is something Peter needs. Peter needs to be able to proclaim his love for Jesus three times. Jesus is giving him the opportunity to reject his denials. Jesus is allowing him to say, "I know you love me, Peter. I'm going to get you to say it so we're good with each other." Three times is powerful for Peter. Jesus is giving the gift of restoration. Jesus is enabling Peter to feel restored in relationship. Sometimes we need to say it out loud and we need the other person to hear us say it out loud. And we need to see them smile at us.

Peter's shame was public. The restoration is public. Jesus honors Peter here three times in front of these other men. If they are wondering is Peter set aside, is somebody else going to lead now? No! Not only does Peter know he is forgiven. They know he is forgiven. Not only forgiven but restored. And sometimes this kind of public restoration needs to happen and it's painful, and we don't like conflict so, we don't do it. But then the wound doesn't get fully cleaned out. This was public sin by a leader. That wound, we need to clear this out. And it needs to be done with the others who were involved. The wound is still going to smart, it hurts, and it is going to continue to hurt after this conversation. Peter is going to continue, I imagine, to regret his denial and his failure, and to wish, "I wish I had never done that!" But even though it still smarts, it is now clean, and it is well bandaged. And it will heal in time. Jesus has forgiven Peter's guilt. He has restored Peter's honor. Peter can see himself as good in eyes of Jesus, as valuable because Jesus sees him that way. He sees him as good and as valuable. He sees him as a guy who can tend to his sheep. And Peter can say that. "Jesus sees me as somebody who has something to offer."

Earlier, Jesus declared, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." But this interaction assures us that Jesus understands this is messy for us. Jesus knows that even if we love him as Peter loved him, we are still going to struggle to obey. We love. But that love is countered by other motivations, by selfishness, by fear, by lust. There will be times that we choose sin over obedience. Does that mean we never loved Jesus or that we don't love him at all? At those times, we will be loving something else more than Jesus. That does not mean we do not love Jesus, or we haven't loved Jesus. It means there's a competition for our affection. It means we love Jesus incompletely,

weakly, not exclusively. And it is messy. We have begun a journey that is changing us, but we are not going to be complete until the end of that journey, until we are glorified and made whole in Heaven. Jesus is not looking for an opportunity to cast us away when we fail. Jesus understands that failure can be used for growth, that sin can be turned into a learning moment. He has made a way to forgive that as Holy God so that the penalty, the guilt doesn't have to remain on us, so that we can get up and move forward and grow. That is the great tragedy of Judas. Like Peter, Judas came to regret his unfaithfulness towards Jesus. He took the money back. He tried to give it back. But he did not know what to do with his guilt and shame. He did not come back to Jesus. He didn't know he could. He did not know Jesus well enough, and not knowing Jesus he became one without hope. Overwhelmed by despair he hung himself.

As low as Peter got, Peter knew enough to hold on to Jesus. Peter came back to the community of disciples and as a result, he experienced the restoring power of the love of Jesus.

I wonder if Peter had this experience of Jesus meeting with him over this breakfast, over this fire, I wonder if he had that in mind when he wrote 1 Peter 4:8. And he told the sheep, the flock of Jesus, he told them, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:8. Peter knew what it meant for love to cover over a multitude of sin. Jesus' love had covered his denials. Jesus' love covers our sin on the cross. The love of Jesus in a theological, spiritual justice way, it covers our sin. But the love of Jesus also can cover our sin in a concrete, specific interaction. This is a human covering over sin, when we truly treat people honorably and with respect, with kindness and grace after they fail. That has the potential to cover over sin, the pain of sin and the fruit of sin and the ongoing sin. Love is a powerful restorative.

Even when our theology teaches us that we are forgiven and loved, we need reminders. We need human voices, human interaction. We need other people to remind us that we are loved and that we are forgiven and that we have so much to offer even after we fail. That is the truth about you. Failure is not an end. Sin is not an end. It's an opportunity to get up and to learn more about who you are, and more about who your gracious Savior is. And through those wounds maybe become more compassionate and more insightful in your ability to care for other people.

Jesus went to extra effort to show Peter honor in front of the other disciples. He could have shamed Peter, he could have wagged his head, narrowed his eyes, and spoken to him sternly. He could have set Peter off to the side, giving his position to another disciple. Instead, Jesus took the time to create a scene that would allow Peter to be restored. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could learn to restore like Jesus restores?

Love covers over a multitude of sin. Peter knew what that felt like. He got it from Jesus. He sought to live it out himself. And he exhorts us to do the same.

There is one more lesson here that Jesus wants to drive home. Let's read verses 18-23. And this is Jesus talking directly to Peter.

*Run Your Race with Eyes Fixed on Jesus (18-33)*

<sup>18</sup> "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." <sup>19</sup> Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

<sup>20</sup> Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following *them*; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?"

<sup>21</sup> So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me!" <sup>23</sup> Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but *only*, "If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you?"



Jesus has gone on here to give Peter some very difficult information. He tells him how he will die. It is difficult to hear on the one hand and yet, oddly affirming on the other. Peter had declared his willingness to die for Jesus. You remember that. That was the night of the arrest. "I will die for you!" And he failed epically, proving unfaithful. Now, immediately after being restoring, Jesus informs him, "And by the way, you will grow to be the kind of person you wished to be. You will be courageous enough to go to death for me. You will be faithful. You will stretch out your hands in your death, just as I stretched out mine. Your time will come to lay down your life for me. But you have got a lot to do before then. You must first lay down your life in daily service to my flock."

Then Jesus ends it with this direct commission, "Follow me."

Then Peter does what we always do. Jesus said, "Follow me," and He looked around and spotted John and asked, "What about him?" We are so driven to compare. Jesus had just warned Peter of that danger when he asked, "Do you love me more than these?" There are two lessons about comparison here. Do not define your value through comparison with other people. That is what we already addressed. It's not, "I love you more than he loves you." It's, "Yes, Lord, I love you." And now the lesson here, do not judge your journey in comparison to the journeys of other people.

We each have our own race to run. You can learn from the journeys of other people. You can gain wisdom and you can gain insight into your own experience. And that's what we are doing right now that we are looking at Peter's journey, we are learning things. But we are not going to have the same experience as Peter. God takes each one of us on different paths. You might suffer a lot more on your path, on your journey, than somebody else, than another brother or sister in Christ, and that doesn't mean you are more approved by God nor does it mean you are more judged by God. You are running the race that God has marked out for you. Don't try to determine whether it is fair or not. It is certainly not fair in any human sense of the idea. I know it is not fair I was born with the family, with the parents I was born with. That is not fair. We are always going to have more than somebody else, depending on who we compare ourselves to, or less than somebody else, depending on who we compare ourselves to. Fairness is such a human way of looking at things. Our path is not fair because God is not fair in the human sense, not in the sense of getting everybody the same. But what God is, is good. He is always good. And he is always just. And he is always loving. Do not seek to understand your journey in comparison to others. You seek to understand God on your journey, to hold on to the truth that God is good, and God loves me, no matter how hard or dark things might get.

So, when Peter tries to compare himself to John, Jesus turns Peter's eyes back to himself. Don't be looking at all the other brothers and sisters, and judging fairness or not fairness, or saying, "I'm more worthy," or, "I'm less worthy." Verse 22, "Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me!'"

Can you hear Jesus saying that to you? Stop looking around at everybody else. You follow me. Fix your eyes on Jesus and run the race he has marked out for you.

### **Conclusion: We know his witness is true (21:24-25)**

The Gospel ends with verses 24-25.

<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup> And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

John lived a full life for Jesus. Before his life ended, after years of preaching the good news of Jesus, he wrote down his witness for us to exhort us to believe in Jesus and live. And I want to end with this one little aspect of this witness that I have not addressed through the series, which is: why did John call himself throughout, "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? I did explain that he didn't name himself as the author because he doesn't want his witness to be his own biography. His testimony is not about him. His testimony is about Jesus. But I didn't talk about why did he chose to describe himself in this way, "the disciple whom Jesus loved?"

Did John sense that Jesus loved him more than these others? If Jesus had asked him the question, he asked Peter, “John, do you love me more than these?”, would John say, “Well, yes, Lord. You love me more. I’m the one you love.” And there is probably a little problem with the article, the “the” article in Greek that comes across stronger in English - he is THE disciple Jesus loved, and that throws us off a bit because that is not what John is saying.

And we have seen here Jesus reject that kind of comparison. Jesus wants each one of us to see himself or herself according to their relationship with the Father and the Son. And that is what John is doing. He is simply saying, “I am one who is loved.” That is what I am. I am the disciple that Jesus loves. And he doesn’t mean for us to make it exclusive to John. He is not the only disciple Jesus loved. This is who I am. I am a disciple loved by Jesus.

And I think that John wants for each one of us to be able to embrace that title ourselves, that we would come to know Jesus and we would come to know ourselves.

Who is Jesus? The Son of God, Savior of the World.

Who am I? I am the disciple Jesus loves.

Do those words express your own convictions? Can you say that from your heart?

Who is Jesus? The Son of God, Savior of the World.

And who am I? I am the disciple who Jesus loves. That is who I am. I am one who is loved.

We end here our series *Interpreting the Gospel of John*. As usual, I will take a break before starting the next series. This time the break will be a little longer. I will start up again in October 2020 with a new series called *Interpreting the Book of Acts*. *Interpreting John* has been my third full series. First, we did *Interpreting Romans* and then *Interpreting the Pentateuch*. Both of those series are available at [observetheword.com](http://observetheword.com) or through itunes or podbean or whatever app you use for podcast listening. Just search or scroll to the earlier lessons.

Thank you for joining me in this study of John. May God the Father bless you as you walk with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the fellowship of believers. To his glory, amen.

### Reflection questions

1. Read John 21:1-17. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
2. How does this live fishing metaphor relate to the abide in the vine metaphor?
3. If you had denied Jesus and Jesus then invited you to enjoy a meal with baked over an open fire beside a lake, what are some emotions you might experience?
4. Jesus creates a moment of restoration for Peter that he will never forget. What kind of impact do you imagine this moment had on Peter through his later life? How might that been different if there was no meal and no three-time repetition of “Do you love me. Feed my sheep”? What if Jesus had just said, “Don’t worry about it.” Or “Let’s just move on and not talk about it?” What would have been lost for Peter?
5. Read John 21:18-25. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
6. Thinking about Peter’s desire to compare his experience to John, how often would you say you compare your journey to other believers’ journeys? What are a couple of examples when you have done that?
7. What are some of the dangers of thinking about your journey with Jesus in comparison to others?
8. Think about John’s designation of himself through his Gospel. Can you imagine yourself in relationship with Jesus as a beloved disciple intent on following him?
9. End this study with time in prayer, asking Jesus to continue his work of helping you see him and helping you see yourself. Commit to following him as a child of God and witness to the truth.