

Another Chance

Often, we come to the end of the year more conscious of our failures than our successes. Perhaps we are heavy with regret, with guilt, feeling we really are no further for the Lord at the end of this year than we were at the end of last year. Sometimes, we are worn out, considering giving it all up, and seriously considering throwing in the towel. If that is you, Christ has a message for you today in the last chapter of the Gospel of John.

John 21 closes out the book of John, and is a fitting way to close out the year. In it, we find the strengthening of a denier. John 21 is where Christ, in love and mercy, reaches out to restore Simon Peter. John 20 is the silencing of the doubter – Thomas, but John 21 is the strengthening of the denier – Peter. The chapter begins like this:

After these things, Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed He himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of His disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, 'I go a fishing.'

John 21:1-3

Here is the scene – Christ has risen from the dead. The disciples have seen Him. There has been great joy – their King has conquered death, He is truly alive, the cross was not the end. However, there is also some uncertainty among them. Why doesn't He restore the kingdom right now? Why does He appear and then leave, appear and leave? What is to be their ministry from now on – if any at all?

There doesn't seem to be the clear direction they thought they had just a few weeks ago. Moreover, peer into Peter's heart. The One he denied three times, the One he refused to acknowledge, has turned out to be God in the flesh – the Victor over all. Can he have denied this one? Oh, the sense of failure must be overwhelming. That night, Peter went out and wept bitterly, now – he probably just feels regret all the time.

How he had boasted that, though others may forsake Jesus, he would die for Him! And a young lady sitting around a fire had made him curse, swear and disown Jesus. He is crushed under the weight of his failure, the weight of his sin. Worse, the disciples he was meant to lead, know of his failure. They all know how their leader had denied Christ. He must feel forever disqualified from ministry. He must feel Christ will never again walk so closely with him.

Judas betrayed Jesus for money, but Peter betrayed Him for self-protection. Seeing Jesus alive is all at once a joy and an agony for him. Perhaps that's you – crushed under the weight of your repetitive failures. Certain that Christ has given up on you, so weary of promises you make and do not keep – hurting that you can never please Christ the way you want to.

And so, Peter announces, "I'm going fishing." Perhaps we should not read too much into this – but it looks like Peter is saying – 'I'm going to go back to what I used to do. I was a better

fisherman than apostle. Let me just return to familiar waters.' But watch how Christ moulds the whole scene to restore Peter. Firstly, He used a reminder.

1. The reminder

They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, "Children, have ye any meat?" They answered him, "No." And He said unto them, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, "It is the Lord."

John 21:4-7

Now, does this story sound familiar? It's because the exact same incident happened right at the start of Christ's ministry, as recorded in **Luke 5**. There Peter, James and John were still half fisherman, half disciples of Jesus, vacillating between serving Him and staying on as fisherman. Well, you remember how it went – Jesus starts by telling them to cast out a net.

Peter responds, 'Lord we've toiled all night and caught nothing, but at your Word we'll let it down' – and they came up with so many fish, the nets broke. Peter then falls at Jesus' knees, saying, "*Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord*" (**Luke 5:8**). See, in one instant, Jesus had exceeded Peter's wildest dreams for fishing. He had given him an impossible catch – and shown how the things he was chasing after were puerile and superficial, compared with what Christ had for him.

At that moment, Peter recognised this was God in front of him, capable of speaking a word and meeting all Peter's childhood fishing ambitions. Jesus had pulled the carpet from under him – with one sentence, made nought all his supposed skill, knowledge and ingenuity regarding fishing. Clearly, Christ was what He needed.

And now, here in John 21, Jesus re-creates that scene. What a lump must have formed in Peter's throat as it happened just like that day, and the memories came flooding back. No wonder, John says, "*It is the Lord.*" Peter, in his characteristic way, dives into the sea and swims to shore. What was Jesus doing? He was reminding Peter of what made him forsake fishing for following Him in the first place: that **divine success overwhelms human failure**.

He was reminding Peter: 'You fail to catch fish all night – I catch them with a word. Yes, Peter, you have failed – you denied me. Your flesh is weak; you are sorely disappointed with yourself. But my power, my success, will overwhelm your failure.' Peter, like so many of us, had to learn – God is strongest in us when we are weakest. God is most at work in us when we are very distrustful of our own ability, and relying totally on His.

We have to learn the hard way – our sin is an enemy inside the camp that will sell us out, again and again. Until we learn to live a crucified life, placing no confidence in the flesh, and all of it on Christ, we will fail, again and again. But God is encouraging us – do not dwell on your failures. Left to ourselves, failure is exactly what will happen – we are jars of clay, prone to sin.

Our focus is not to be on our failures – they should not surprise us – it should surprise us we did not fail more.

Instead, we must focus on the divine success. **Philippians 1:6** says, *“Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* God will make a success of your Christian life – if we will dwell on that. It is often our own sense of discouragement that further hinders us. And Christ begins by reminding Peter – ‘I succeed, even when you fail. Focus on Me.’ Then notice, secondly, what He does.

2. The reception

As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught. Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine.

John 21:9-12

See the tenderness of Jesus – calling them ‘children’, making breakfast for them, inviting them to come and eat. Imagine the heaviness in Peter’s heart – how torn he is. He so loves Jesus, and can’t believe how his flesh failed him. He swims to shore, exhausted and panting, but for once – speechless. What can he say to Jesus? How would you feel being in the presence of One you had publicly denied three times?

Indeed, how would you treat someone who had denied all knowledge of you three times? Would you make breakfast for them, invite them to eat with you? This is the grace of Christ. But here Jesus serves breakfast to His disciples. This is the second great lesson – Christ is teaching Peter: **You need to receive properly, to give properly.**

You need to accept Christ’s service of you, before you can ever serve Him effectively. Remember the night before His crucifixion, when Christ began to wash His disciples feet? Do you recall Peter’s reaction? *“You will never wash my feet!”* Peter was like so many of us – eager to give, give, give, and reluctant to receive. He thought it even humility to refuse to be served by Christ. But in fact, it was pride.

It is pride that refuses to receive, because it does not want to be in a place of humble debt and gratitude. So it forever gives – hoping to stave off the gentle tenderness of just receiving from Christ. Jesus was not impressed with Peter that day; He responded by saying, *“If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me”* (**John 13:8**).

Peter did not yet understand, but would later – you cannot give to Christ, unless you have effectively received. Christ’s perfect service of us is the foundation of our service for Him. Remember **Mark 10:45**: *“For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

We have to realise – the Christian life is not *doing for* God, it is *responding to* God. How do you respond, if you do not receive? We love Him because He first loved us. Consider that God

compares us to the relationship between husband and wife. Christ is the husband, and the church is the wife. Do you understand what is meant by that?

God is painting us in the feminine role. We are not initiators of love. We are not protectors, providers, leaders of Christ. We are responders. We receive His initiative, and react. We receive His protection and provision, and answer with adoration and service and obedience. Many a Christian's failure can be traced back to a lack of receiving.

This, friends, is the primary reason for a quiet time. Not to give God anything – but to receive: to receive His love, His wisdom, His direction, His grace. This is prayer – not to give, but to receive, and then respond. A refusal to receive is pride. You cannot initiate love with God – otherwise you are in the flesh. Your life is to be a response to His love, and thus you ought to be feeling that you are receiving a lot more than you are giving – because that's what is true.

You cannot out-give God. And when we feel we have given more to God this year than we have received from Him – it's because we are probably not spending adequate time in His presence – eating breakfast with Him, so to speak. Peter had to learn: sit down, be quiet, humble yourself to be served by the King. Eat with awe-filled gladness what He puts in front of you, shake your head in amazement as you see the King serving you. Receive, that you may respond.

3. The restoration

Thirdly, Jesus now turns to the broken-hearted Peter. Peter can see the point. His denial was based upon his fleshly impulsiveness – he thought he could serve Christ in his own strength. He sees the problem was not in his giving, but in his receiving. He knows Christ's success will overwhelm his failure – but there needs to be a personal restoration. Watch carefully, as the loving Shepherd moves in to heal the heart of Peter.

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?" He saith unto Him, "Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He saith unto him, "Feed my lambs." He saith to him again the second time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?" He saith unto Him, "Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He saith unto him, "Feed my sheep." He saith unto him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?" Peter was grieved because He said unto him the third time, "Lovest thou Me?" And he said unto Him, "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." Jesus saith unto him, "Feed my sheep."

John 21:15-17

Now think about this. Jesus does not ask Peter, 'Peter, do you promise to be more loyal in the future?' He does not ask, 'Peter, will you give to me? Peter, do you serve me? Peter, do you fear me? Peter, do you obey me?' No, those things are captured in the questions Jesus asks. He gets down to the very root of our Christian lives. With surgical skill, he effectively, and yet painfully, plunges the most important question into Peter's heart – do you *love* Me?

What a question. Nothing would make us so squirm as to be asked directly by our Lord, with Him looking us in the eye, "Do you love Me?" Because, in our heart of hearts, we know the answer is: "Not like I should, Lord." We know that every time we sinned this year, it was because we loved something more than Him.

We consistently pursued other things as idols – things we loved more than Him. We refused to pursue pleasure in God, and loved other things, other people, other pastimes, more than Him. How painful to be asked that question. More so, because of how He loves us. When has He denied us? When has He chosen to forsake us for things that would please Him more? When did He reject us in favour of someone or something else?

Peter feels the burning pain of conviction. He denied Christ. He effectively said, 'I hate Him. I have nothing to do with Him.' Now Jesus asks Him, 'Do you love me?' But realise what is going on here. Jesus is not interrogating Peter. He is not trying to hurt him. No. Understand that when God asks the questions, it is never to gain information, to learn or to find something out.

Did Jesus know if Peter loved Him? He certainly did. So why ask? God asks questions of us, to give answers to our questions. God asks – like He did with Job, with Adam, with Cain, with Elijah – to *teach* us.

And what is Jesus teaching Peter? He is teaching Peter to realise that the root of his Christian life is his love for Christ. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Every single failure in our Christian lives can be traced back to a failure to love God. Every success can be traced back to loving God. So Christ is putting His failure into perspective.

Jesus is showing Peter that success in the future was not going to be by having more will-power, working on his boldness, taking a course in confidence-boosters; it was going to be loving Christ more intensely. Always, we need to simplify. The Christian life is simply a love relationship with Christ. Everything else must be linked back to that. When you start separating the parts from the whole, you get confused, frustrated and worn out. Your love for Christ is everything.

But why does Jesus ask Peter the question three times? Firstly, to counter his three denials. Peter publicly denied Jesus three times. Now, as leader among the apostles, he gets to publicly profess his devotion and love for Christ before them. It is a public, if not somewhat painful, restoration. He gets to say it out loud – I love you, Lord. Secondly, Jesus does it to emphasise *how* Peter is to love Him.

To start, He asks Peter if he loves Him **supremely**. "Simon... lovest thou me *more than these?*" More than these – am I your first love, Peter? Do you love me more than wife, children, family? Do you love me more than career, success, fame, wealth, comfort, safety, health and luxury? More than personal pleasure, power, reputation, material comforts, friends, leisure, interests and pursuits? Am I top of the list? And is that true of you and I – do we live Christ supremely?

Then, He asks “*lovest thou Me?*” Here the Greek word for love used is *agape*. It refers to a sacrificial love. Do you love me **sacrificially**, Peter? Love isn’t love till it costs. Love isn’t love until it hurts. Just ask Abraham. And did you ever consider that God, being the Creator of all things, could not love sacrificially – since all that He could possibly ‘lose’ He made, and could re-create it. That is, unless He gave up *Himself*.

That is why the cross of Calvary is so awesome – because the Perfect, Creator God, experienced sacrifice. He endured sacrificial love – for us. He loved till it pained Him. Sacrificial love is loving at your own expense. Have you ever loved God like that?

Thirdly, He asks “*Lovest thou Me?*” Here the Greek word for love used is *phileo*. It refers to brotherly love. The bond of deep, loyal, family love – that loves throughout. Recall **Mark 3:33-35**: “*And He answered them, saying, ‘Who is my mother, or my brethren?’ And He looked round about on them which sat about Him, and said, ‘Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.’”*

This is a **steadfast** Love. It’s loyal. It continues in the relationship, in obedience. This love continues – it abides. *Agape* love speaks of **intensity**, *phileo* love speaks of **consistency**. It will love in the ups and the downs. It will not be double-minded. It will not vacillate. It will not be loyal half the time, and betray the other half. It will not be lukewarm – hot at times, and cold at others. No, it is a whole-hearted love. It is akin to the Old Testament word *hesed* – a steadfast, loyal love.

That’s a tall order. Do you love me supremely? Do you love me sacrificially? Do you love me steadfastly?

Now, at the end of this year, as Christ asks us those questions, we know in our heart – such questions are troubling. We know our love has been impure, mixed in with large amounts of selfishness, self-protectiveness, divided loyalties, lukewarmness. What do we reply to such questions?

Peter’s reply is humble: “*Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee*” – ‘Yes, Lord, You know all things – you know I do love you.’ But Peter’s reply is wise, because he knows Christ is not asking for information. It’s wise because Peter is really saying, ‘God, I myself don’t know how much I love you. I know I do. But I don’t trust my own heart. I’m not going to be making brash statements again about how I will die for you. My heart betrayed both me and You. All I know is I do love You, and only You know how much.’

Here is the comforting thing. God knows how much we love Him, and the love we have for Him is also a work of grace in our heart. We can beat ourselves up over not loving God more, but the truth is, our flesh will never love God supremely, sacrificially or steadfastly. That is why **Romans 5:5** tells us the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which is given unto us.

Loving God is like embers which He lights in our hearts, and asks us simply to blow on them, to fan them into a fire. He works in our hearts to love Him. Indeed, the highest joy is when God

loves Himself through us, perfectly. But what do I do to blow on those embers? How do I fan the love God has placed into my heart into action? The answer is in Christ's response to Peter.

"Feed my sheep." What does He mean? Christ calls His people sheep and lambs. They are dear to Him. He loves them. He is saying to Peter – take care of them. Feed them. Tend them. Look after them. In essence, Christ is saying – 'If you love Me, then love what I love. If you want a simple method of knowing how to love Me, then love what I love. Let what is dear to Me, be dear to you. Let My heart become yours.'

So what does God love?

Firstly and primarily, God loves His glory. He loves His own holy name. If we love God, we must love all that He is – who He is, in essence. Secondly, God loves His Son. Our love for God is seen in our love for Jesus Christ. Thirdly, He loves His Word. If we love Him, we will love His Word and His commandments, and keep them.

Fourthly, He loves righteousness. If we love Him, we will delight in holiness and hate evil. Fifthly, He loves His church. If we love Christ, we will love His people, and seek to love and build up the local church. Sixth, He loves the world. If we love Him, we will love the lost, and seek to give them the Gospel.

If we seek to love God, then we must seek to find pleasure in, to take delight in, to enjoy, His glory, His Son, His Word, His righteousness, His church, and His Salvation in the gospel for the world. And the love is a response. It is not conjured up inside us. It comes about as we think about His love, and respond to it. Christ then closes by encouraging Peter:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." This spake He, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, "Follow me."

John 21:18-19

In essence, Christ says, 'Peter, you will die a martyr for me. Though you denied me recently, ultimately, you will glorify me. Your failure will be swallowed up in triumph. My grace will so work in you that you will not flinch in the face of death toward the end. You will answer the question 'Do you love Me?' with the loudest possible statement – Yes.' As **John 15:13** puts it, *"Greater love has no man, than that he should lay down his life for his friends."*

To us, Christ says, *"Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 1:24).* We may have failed, but Christ will finish the work He has started in us – He will perfect the love we have for Him, and we will stand before the judgement seat of Christ with joy, not with shame.

Spend some time thinking about how Christ restored a very discouraged Simon Peter. He began by reminding him that failure is human, success is divine. Christ's success will win over.

He then reminded Peter of the fundamental value of receiving grace before giving. Peter had to learn humility, and so do we. Our love is a response – and our love for Him this last year was proportional to how much we allowed God to give us, through the Holy Spirit.

Having taught him this, Christ allowed Peter to reverse his denials with public affirmations of love, and reminded him of the quality of love He required – supreme, sacrificial and steadfast. He then gave Peter the means – love what I love. Follow me. Simplify your Christian life this coming year.

Realise the failures are past, and Christ will complete the work in you. Make it your focus to receive sustenance from Christ, before seeking to serve. Make your quiet time a consistent goal this year. And then focus your heart on loving what God loves this year. With the love that God gives you by His Spirit – love His glory. Love His Son. Love His Word. Love His righteousness. Love His church. Love His world. Then look forward to the perfection He will work in you.

A broken Simon Peter was restored. He knew his failure had not changed the heart of Christ towards him, Who loves us *in spite of*, not *because of*. A little while later, Peter would proclaim the gospel on Pentecost, and 3000 people would be saved. He would do great things for Christ, and as predicted, he gave up his life for Christ, crucified upside down. With Christ, there is another chance for the coming year.