

Forgiven and Commissioned

As hard as it was to believe and no matter how impossible it was to wrap their minds around it, the disciples of Jesus could no longer deny it: their Lord and master, whom they had seen crucified, dead, and lain in a tomb was now alive. For Pete's sake and for the sake of them all, they were eating breakfast with Him on the shore of Galilee! He was there eating with them, talking with them, smiling at them, loving them.

Nevertheless, at least one of them was having a hard time enjoying the moment. From the time they had caught the miraculous catch of fish and he had heard John exclaim: "It is the Lord!" Peter felt the crushing weight of his sins. He was, after all, a great "mess-up" of a disciple. He had pledged undying loyalty to Jesus. Publicly, he had sworn that even if everyone else should forsake the Master, he would not. He would sacrifice his life rather than deny his Lord.

But, all the promises Peter made soon stood up as witnesses against him. Everything he said he would not do is exactly what he did. When the hour of trial came, he failed every test. His fervent oaths of commitment melted into foul oaths of denial. Chicken liver, yellow belly, coward, back-stabber, weakest link, betrayer, etc.--Peter fit the profile. In Jesus' presence, Peter is a bundle of contradictions and raging emotions. When he knew that it was Jesus on the seashore, he couldn't wait to get there. He covered his nakedness with his robe and swam to shore with Olympic effort, yet at the reunion with Jesus and throughout breakfast, Peter was anything but comfortable.

We can imagine what was going on in Peter's head. "It is certainly good news that Jesus is alive, but what does He think of me now? What about my cowardice? Jesus seems relaxed and is enjoying himself. He is savoring the trick He played on us while we were fishing. He ordered the fish to stay away all last night (I know He did) and then He called them to the right side of our boat this morning. I know now that it was all His doing. He waited for us to give up hope of catching anything on our own, and then He showed us again what He can do through us. But am I still included? Jesus seems all right with me, but I can't bear to look in His eyes. There's a boulder in my throat, a roaring in my ears, and a great thumping in my chest. I can hardly breathe. And, as much as I dread it, I wish He would say something about my failure, beat me with club, banish me from

the group as I deserve, but He just sits there in the sand grinning and passing out broiled fish and chunks of bread. It's maddening I tell you--absolutely maddening!"

But once the others had all eaten and were satisfied--I say "the others," because I don't think Peter had much of an appetite that morning--Jesus began to speak to Peter: John 21:15-17 say: "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, '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.'"

The great distance Peter felt between himself and Jesus could not remain. It had to be bridged. In fact, Jesus had already bridged that chasm; His death on the cross had paid the price for Peter's sin. This meant that everything that now stood between Peter and Jesus was all on Peter's side. Only his guilt and his uncertainty of Jesus' forgiveness kept them apart. It would be painful for Peter to confront it all again, but it was the only way forward. So Jesus took the initiative. It started with the address: "Simon son of John," and we have to ask ourselves the question, "Why does Jesus call Peter, "Simon son of John?" It was Jesus who changed Simon's name from "Simon" to "Peter" in the first place. Jesus normally called Peter, "Peter." We also know from what comes next in the passage and from the history of the early church, that by calling him by his birth name, Jesus was not disowning Peter. So, why did he address him this way? I imagine it's something like this.

When Bob Thompson was a boy he occasionally got himself in trouble. When he was little his parents probably called him "Bobby" and later called him by his nickname, "Tiny." But when his mother found out that Bobby had been smoking cigarettes out back of the garage and confronted him with the words "Robert Carl Thompson," Bobby knew and Tiny knew he was in trouble! "Simon, son of John," must have been an ominous sound in Peter's ears also. O.K., here it comes; I'm finally going to get what I deserve.

And, in one sense, Peter did get what he deserved. He had publicly proclaimed that his love for Jesus was superior to the others' love for Jesus. He had said that even if they all fell away, he would not, so Jesus confronts him with that. Publicly, in front of the others whom Peter had maligned, Jesus asked him, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" That must have stung, and we notice that although Peter still claims love for Jesus, he doesn't embellish it by claiming to love Him more than the others. He simply says, "Yes Lord, You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Then Jesus asks Peter a second time, and we notice the Peter isn't off the hook yet, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" In fact, Jesus' second question is asking less than the first one. In the first case, Jesus is asking Peter if he still thinks his love is superior to that of the others, and Peter can no longer go there and doesn't. Now Jesus is asking Peter if his love is sincere: "do you truly love me?" We will notice that Peter doesn't repeat the word "truly;" all he can say is, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Take care of my sheep." Then notice the third question: Still using his full given name, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Now, even the word "truly" is missing. The effect of the three questions is something like this: "Simon, son of John, is your love for me superior, is it even sincere, do you love me at all?"

John tells us that Peter was "hurt" that Jesus asked him the third time "do you love me?" Now Peter's sin is uncovered. He denied Jesus three times, swore up and down, that he didn't belong to Jesus and that he didn't even know Jesus. Three times he denied and three times he is asked to reaffirm his love. I think of John's words in I John 1:6-10, where John says, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives." In other words, if we want to be free from our sins we need to confront them, own up to them, confess their seriousness, and then accept the sacrifice Jesus made for them. **There can be no freedom from sin without honest confession and without the blood of Jesus.**

As I said, in one sense Peter got what he deserved. But in another sense, in a positive sense, Peter got so much more. I suspect that Peter's expectations were pretty low in regard to his position among the other disciples. He dared hope that he might be accepted as part of the family, but he must have thought any chance for leadership had been forfeited. Like the wayward son in the parable of the prodigal, Peter may have thought to beg Jesus to take him back as a hired hand or as the least of the least among his servants. But wonder of wonders, at the very same time Jesus is reminding Peter of his sin, He is also restoring to him his mission and place of leadership. Jesus is in effect saying, "I've not given up on you, Peter!" "I haven't changed my mind about you." "You're still a rock, and I'm still going to use you to build my church." "This is the way you will prove your love for me: You are going to feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, and feed my sheep." Peter expected demotion, but what Peter got was grace.

There are three great truths in this Scripture passage we have been looking at this morning. The first great truth is that the risen Christ desires our fellowship; no matter how much we have promised and failed to keep our promises to Him, no matter how big a mess we have made of ourselves and our ministries, He still loves us and wants us back. He still loves you and is still determined to fulfill the plans He had for you before you were born. You are of such great value to Him that He sent His Son Jesus to bleed out His blood for you. And, as the old gospel hymn proclaims, "that blood has never lost its power." **He wants you back.**

The second great truth we see in this Scripture today is that we cannot come back to Him and receive His forgiveness without the painful process of confronting, confessing, and accepting responsibility for our sins. We have to be humbled before we can be exalted. As long as we are still making excuses, giving reasons, blaming our mess-ups on our parents, genes, spouses, partners in crime, or even on the Devil, we are not going to get very far on our spiritual journey. God wants us back, but we can't get back to Him until we admit our rebellion, renounce our pride, and rest on His mercy.

One of the most successful and damaging lies the Devil has slipped into our culture is what is known as Transactional Analysis, an approach to psychology which begins with the

premise: "I'm OK; You're OK." While it is absolutely true to say that I am of tremendous and eternal value and that you are of tremendous and eternal value and absolutely true to say that God passionately and overwhelmingly loves us, we are not "OK" unless and until we have confessed and given up our rebellion against the Lord. **We need to be reconciled to our Creator before we can ever be "OK."**

The first truth is that God wants us back. The second truth is that the way back is for us to take responsibility for our sins, confess and renounce them, and allow the Lord to cover them with His blood. The third and final major truth I see in this part of John 21 is that we are restored for a purpose.

I find myself in a bit of a dilemma these days. I think my long time hobby of fixing up and maintaining my antique automobiles is about to come to an end. I have always subscribed to the philosophy that there is no use having something that you do not or cannot use, at least occasionally. I've never had the luxury of putting money and energy into vehicles that would just sit in the garage. I chose them and have kept them because I enjoy driving them. But at 15 or 16 miles to the gallon gas mileage and soon to be \$4 a gallon gas prices, the hand-writing is on the gas pumps: I'm doomed! To see them just sitting there taking up space and not be able to drive them anywhere will drive me crazy; I'm seriously looking for some serious buyers.

We too are restored for a purpose and that purpose is not just to sit around and look pretty. Jesus says to Peter, while restoring him, "feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, and feed my sheep." And, twice, once in verse 19 and then again in verse 22, Jesus says to him, "follow me." We are redeemed for a purpose, and that purpose is to pass on the truth of God's love and God's word to this present and to the next generation. That purpose is to know and follow Jesus wherever He leads us and to glorify God with the lives and gifts He has given us. **God has a purpose for your life; you are redeemed for a purpose.**

God wants us back. We need to humble ourselves, confess and repent of our sins, and trust in the sacrifice of Jesus for our forgiveness. We need to embrace our purpose and calling as the children and servants of God.

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John 21:15-22

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