

The Restoring Love And Power Of Christ

John 21:1-17

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Many try to deal with past sins in various ways. Some do so by punishing themselves (as did Martin Luther by self-flagellation) or by calling themselves names. Some do so by depriving themselves of food (to show how despicable of a person they really are). Others go to the other extreme of drowning themselves in food, wine, sex, money, and clothing, or by binging in the very sin that brought on the guilt in the first place. Others go to a priest and receive various acts of penance which they are told will purge away the guilt and sin. Others simply push the sin into the background of their memories or contrive various excuses to justify their sin. Finally, there are those who deal with past sins by lashing out at others, and making life generally miserable not only for themselves, but for everyone around them.

Dear ones, the Lord does not endorse any of the methods above in our dealing with our sins. Today we will learn how even the Apostle Peter fell into similar means as described above to deal with his guilt and shame in denying the Lord Jesus Christ, and how the resurrected Christ restored the Apostle Peter. The main points from our text are these: (1) The Resurrected Christ Restores Peter In Spite Of His Sin (John 21:1-14); (2) The Resurrected Christ Confronts Peter With His Sin (John 21:15-17); (3) The Resurrected Christ Commissions Peter To Serve Him In Spite Of His Sin (John 21:15-17).

I. The Resurrected Christ Restores Peter In Spite Of His Sin (John 21:1-14).

A. This is yet another post-resurrection appearance of Christ to His weak and struggling Apostles (in this case, seven of them, who are listed in John 21:2). Peter announces his intention to go fishing: “I go a fishing” (John 21:3). The six Apostles just mentioned also decide to join Peter. Some of these Apostles were experienced fishermen (particularly, Peter, James, and John), and so it may not be surprising at all that they decided to go fishing while they waited for further instructions from the Lord (who had commanded them through an angel to wait for Him in Galilee, Mark 16:7).

1. Something strange happens as they go fishing: they catch no fish all night long. Here were experienced fishermen who caught nothing all night long. Now fishing at night was not the problem, for that was a good time to catch fish. A lack of experience was not the problem, for professional fishermen were aboard that tiny ship. Why had they not caught any fish during the whole night? Because Christ had ordained to meet with Peter, in order to deal specifically with Peter’s fall into sin and his restoration into fellowship and service.

2. Dear ones, can you imagine how Peter’s mind might replay the three denials of the Lord over and over and over again? For Peter was the one who had boasted with pride that not only would he never deny Christ, but that he would die for him, even if everyone else forsook Him. Although (no doubt) Peter rejoiced to see the resurrected Savior, once can understand how each appearance of Christ to His Disciples might actually exacerbate the guilt he still had over his unfaithfulness to the Lord. And so this appearance of Christ (in John 21) was especially for Peter’s benefit, just as a previous appearance of Christ (in John 20) was especially for Thomas’s benefit.

3. Here the Holy Spirit shows us how a frustrating and disappointing experience of fishing all night without any success was specifically designed by the Lord to reveal to His Disciples (and

particularly Peter) the power and love of the resurrected Christ.

a. Dear ones, as Christians we struggle daily with heinous and aggravated sins, which we have committed against Christ, against a loved one, or even against a stranger. Does the Lord cast us away wanting nothing more to do with us ever again? Does the Lord abandon us altogether due to our proud, vile, foolish, and rebellious sins committed against Him and others?

b. Dear ones, the consequences of sin are painful in our own lives and in the lives of loved ones (for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, Galatians 6:7). However, our Savior is so mighty, so wise, and so loving, that even the devastating sins into which we fall are used by the Lord to break our stubborn pride, our vain foolishness, and willful rebellion, and to instruct us to flee to Him for His forgiveness, to eye the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, and to renew our loving obedience to walk in His ways. This is not an excuse to continue in sin that grace may abound, but is simply how the Lord demonstrates His sovereignty and love even through our sins as Christians (who have trusted alone in Christ alone as our only hope of eternal salvation).

B. Continuing now in our text, as morning dawns, there on the shoreline can be seen a human figure, but one whom the Apostles did not yet recognize, possibly due to the distance they were from the shore or due to the lack of full sunlight. According to our text, the figure is the resurrected Christ (John 21:4). Again the resurrected Christ takes the initiative to come to His struggling, faltering disciples. Peter had the opportunity on at least two previous resurrection appearances of Christ (in John 20) to talk with Christ about his grievous backsliding in denying the Lord Jesus, but he had not done so. It would appear that Peter had repented of this denial of Christ (Luke 22:61-62). But it would also appear that due to the weakness of his faith at this time, and the shame and

sorrow that he felt that Peter was still struggling greatly over his denial of Christ. But here comes the resurrected Christ, for the express purpose of helping Peter remove all doubt as to Christ's forgiveness and restoration of Peter, using even the sin which Peter committed for our own instruction and encouragement (as we shall see).

1. First, let us observe that the resurrected Christ comes to His Disciples (including Peter) as a **LOVING SAVIOR** (John 21:5). What tenderness is here expressed as the Lord comes to the Disciples (including that struggling disciple, Peter). Though Peter had denied even knowing Him three times, Peter is included among Christ's children for whom He suffered the everlasting condemnation of a holy God. Christ calls not to the Disciples as the children of wrath (as we all are by nature), but as the children of God (as we are by grace through faith in Christ). We may feel at times that Christ could not possibly love us due to the number of times we have sinned in grievous ways against Him, but He continues to come to us calling us, "Children." And that becomes the chief means that the resurrected Christ uses to humble us and to drive us unto Himself. Not condemnation and wrath to His beloved children, but unfailing love and mercy. Dear ones, the resurrected Christ is always coming to us, His beloved children, even when we have grievously sinned against Him. He always is the One to initiate our restoration to fellowship and communion with Him. This is the very nature of the Covenant of Grace.

2. Second, note that the resurrected Christ also comes to His Disciples (including Peter) as a **POWERFUL SAVIOR** (John 21:6). Christ (the all-knowing Son of God) knew the futile night they had spent fishing. This was a miraculous catch of fish. For immediately when they cast their nets on the right side of the boat, their net was filled with so many fish that they were unable to draw it into the boat.

a. The resurrected Christ shows to us that without Him we can do nothing. We can't even fish, or perform our ordinary duties or

callings in life apart from His blessing. How much more so when we seek to fish for men in drawing men to the Lord Jesus Christ? Dear ones, it is not our charm, ability, or education that draws men to Jesus Christ. It is the power of the resurrected Christ that fills our nets with those for whom we have fervently prayed and have sought to lead to the Lord Jesus through our words and deeds (“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” 1 Corinthians 3:6). “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:9).

b. Here we see how even when it appears that we are wasting our time by fishing all night and catching nothing (or looking for work and catching nothing, or looking for a house and catching nothing, or waiting for direction from the Lord and catching nothing, or praying for the Lord to change a heart of a family member or friend and catching nothing, or pleading with the Lord to grant victory over a besetting sin and catching nothing) that the Lord is using those waiting periods (or seeming futile nights of fishing) to reveal to us His unfailing love, His almighty power, and His ever-constant faithfulness.

c. Dear ones, the long night of futile fishing and catching nothing in your lives (as God’s beloved children) is not the end of the story. It is a mere slice of life. For the resurrected Christ comes as a mighty Savior to fill your nets at His appointed time. He knows the end from the beginning, and He will fill your nets with fish at His appointed time. This is our confident and certain hope. This is why you must not discontinue your fishing while you wait for the Lord to fill your net. And even if your net is not filled with the fish that you anticipated, He will fill your net with a measure of grace that is far more valuable than any mere earthly possession.

C. Now as we return to our text, note the following two instances in which Peter seems to go out of his way to prove that He loves the Lord

even more than the other Apostles. Peter had greatly fallen into sin, and the resurrected Christ has not yet addressed his grievous failure in the previous resurrection appearances. What can Peter do to demonstrate to the Lord his sorrow for his sin, and his love for Christ (by standing out from the rest of the Apostles)? These attempts to show to the Lord his love also reveal the struggles Peter yet had in his own conscience with his fall into sin, and the reason why Christ appeared to Peter at this time.

1. In the FIRST INSTANCE, the Apostle John (“the disciple whom Jesus loved”), having heard the love of the resurrected Christ call them “children”, and having witnessed the power of the resurrected Christ miraculously fill their nets, identifies the stranger as the Lord (John 21:7). Upon hearing that, what does Peter alone do? He jumps into the waters of the Sea of Galilee, and swims 200 cubits (or approximately 100 yards) to shore. Now did any of the other Apostles do the same thing? They had all in some way forsaken the Lord (Mark 14:50). Thomas (who was in the boat with Peter) had stubbornly refused to believe that Christ was raised from the dead until he touched His wounds (in effect giving God an ultimatum, in John 20:25), but he did not jump into the water to swim 100 yards to shore. None of the Disciples seemed to feel the necessity to swim 100 yards to shore. The rest of the Apostles arrive safely in the ship a while later and a great deal drier (John 21:8). I would suggest that poor Peter was striving to express his love for the Lord in the most conspicuous way he could, because he had failed the Lord in a most conspicuous way, in having denied even knowing the Lord 3 times. Peter was in effect saying by His actions, “Lord, look how much I love you, even though I miserably failed you. I want to be the first one to greet you.”

a. Is it not common for us all to want to do something very special for our spouse or for our children or for our parents, if we have miserably blown it? It is certainly not a bad thing to demonstrate our love for someone we have greatly offended. However, we must be

careful that what we do is not done merely to cover the guilt and shame that we feel.

b. Men, it is easy for us to go out and buy our wife something special if we have offended her, rather than humbly confessing our sin to her, seeking her forgiveness, and renewing our marriage covenant in our own hearts to be a loving leader and servant to her. In such cases, we have not really faced our sin, but have simply covered it due to our guilt and shame. We act similarly to Peter acting as though standing apart from other husbands, our wife will notice that we do love her. Men, let us be careful that we first deal with our guilt and shame by way of earnest repentance and humbly seeking forgiveness and then by showing our love, lest we fall into the trap of mere penance in seeking to purchase forgiveness by the things that we do (this is the Romish view of penance).

2. Then we come to the SECOND INSTANCE in which Peter takes the initiative beyond the rest of the Disciples to show he loves the Lord. Once all of the Apostles have arrived at the shore, they find that the resurrected Christ has prepared for them a meal, and He invites them to join Him in fellowship around that fire (John 21:9-13). The resurrected Christ is once again taking the initiative to restore to fellowship and communion. Note here that the resurrected Christ commands the whole group of apostles to bring some fish from the net that IS still attached to their boat (John 21:10). The verb (“bring”) and the pronoun (“ye”) are both in the plural number, rather than in the singular number. Why is that important? This verb (“bring”) is a command, and it is issued to all seven of the Apostles. But who alone jumps up immediately (without hesitation), and all by himself pulls that heavy net of fish to the shore? Peter of course (John 21:11). Why did Peter do so alone? Again, I submit to you that due to his very conspicuous fall in denying the Lord, Peter would seek in a very conspicuous way to demonstrate to the Lord that he

loves Him. The resurrected Christ clearly notices what Peter was doing here for the Lord asks Peter in John 21:15: “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these (i.e. more than these other Apostles)?” In other words, “Peter, do these acts of love demonstrate that you love me more than the other Apostles who did not jump into the water and swim to shore as you did, or who did not pull in the heavy net to shore as you did?” The whole account of Peter’s restoration that follows seems to indicate that Peter was competing with the others Apostles for the Lord’s attention and favor by what he did.

II. The Resurrected Christ Confronts Peter With His Sin (John 21:15-17).

A. The resurrected Christ doesn’t confront Peter with his sin, in order to reveal His vengeance against Peter (as if Christ would never forgive Peter for denying Him). Christ rather confronted Peter with his sin, in order that Peter might be able by God’s grace to move beyond his failure and enjoy the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Dear ones, forgiveness is a promise not to remember against a person the sin that he has committed. The resurrected Christ comes to Peter to give Peter assurance that his failure was indeed forever forgiven.

1. On the one hand, we who GIVE correction to others who have sinned must have the same reason as Christ for going to a brother/sister: to humbly restore them in love to fellowship and communion—to help and encourage them with hope rather than to discourage them with our vengeance and bitterness (where we take the opportunity to get even with them) or pride (where we exalt ourselves at the expense of their fall).

2. On the other hand, we who RECEIVE correction from others must learn to appreciate such correction, for it is a way of life to all

who love it and heed it (Proverbs 15:10). Dear ones, we must understand that the instruction and correction we receive from others (even when it is not delivered to us in the most gracious way) is God's way of maturing us and sanctifying us. If we despise correction or become defensive when we are corrected, we despise one of the means by which the Lord sanctifies the Christian, and one of the means by which the Christian is assured that he is a child of God (Hebrews 12:5-11).

B. The Lord confronts Peter not once with his sin, but three times (in John 21:15,16,17), just as Peter had denied the Lord three times. The resurrected Christ in raising the question of Peter's love for Him three times is focusing on the sin that is at the very root of Peter's denial of Christ: pride. For it was pride that had led Peter to boast that he would never deny Christ or forsake Him—even if his fellow Apostles denied Christ, Peter claimed he would not do so, but would rather die for Him.

1. Let me note at this point that there may not be any intention on the part of the Holy Spirit to distinguish the sense of the two words used for love in this exchange between Christ and Peter: *agapao* (a self-sacrificial love) and *phileo* (a brotherly affection). Christ asks the first time if Peter loves (*agapao*) Him to which Peter responds that he loves (*phileo*) Christ. The same thing occurs again a second time. Finally, the Lord asks Peter if he loves (*phileo*) him to which Peter responds that he loves (*phileo*). Often it is argued that Peter is humbled and cannot use the highest form of Christian love for Christ and Christ finally condescends to Peter and merely uses the word for brotherly affection which Peter uses. I doubt this is what is really going on here. Why?

a. Peter responds "Yes" to the questions which the Lord puts to him in John 21:15,16. Peter does not say, "No, I don't love you with *agapao*, but I do love you with *phileo*."

b. John 21:17 says that Christ had asked Peter the same

question for the THIRD time when Christ used *phileo* rather than for the FIRST time. Just as Christ asked the same question the SECOND time in John 21:16, so Christ now asks the same question the THIRD time.

c. The words “*agapao*” and “*phileo*” may not necessarily convey different meanings any more than the different words used by Christ for Peter’s commissioning in John 21:15 (“feed [*bosko*] my lambs [*arnion*]”, in John 22:16 (“feed [*poimaino*] my sheep [*probation*]”) and in John 22:17 (“feed [*bosko*] my sheep [*probation*]”). Although none of those commissions to Peter are exactly alike, are we to assume that there is a material difference in what Christ is commissioning Peter to do from one commission to the next? I don’t think so. These are stylistic differences (Hebrew parallelism, Ephesians 1:21; Ephesians 5:19), which occur in many places in Scripture.

2. There are two lessons to be learned from the questions of the Lord and the response of Peter.

a. First, in his response Peter no longer is in competition with his fellow Apostles for he doesn’t proclaim, “Yes, I love thee MORE THAN THE REST OF THESE APOSTLES.” He merely declares, “Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.” Dear ones, rivalry and competition (essentially envy) are destructive to the unity within the Church of Christ. Rather we are to rejoice in the gifts and graces of others.

b. Second, Peter is even grieved that the Lord asks him three times whether he loves Him (John 21:17). By the third time Peter’s pride is shattered in the face of Christ’s correction. The Lord knows how to humble us and to knock us down with a feather or with a blow (as is needed). He knows how to humble us, and this He will do in order that we might move beyond the grief of sin (which is necessary) into the joy of forgiveness.

III. The Resurrected Christ Commissions Peter To Serve Him In Spite Of

His Sin (John 21:15-17).

A. In each case where Peter humbly affirms his love for the Lord, the Lord likewise commissions him in particular to care for the sheep which the Lord has given to him. The Lord had already commissioned the Apostles as a group when He appeared to them in John 20:21. Why this further commissioning of Peter in particular? Not because Peter was the first Pope, but because Peter needed this due to the sin he had committed and his inward struggle over his failure.

B. What a gracious Savior is the resurrected Christ (who is the only Mediator between God and man), who will even use such sinful earthen vessels to declare His gospel to all men.

1. I do not believe the Lord is advocating that regardless of the scandalous sin that one may commit, he may immediately resume a place of leadership. The Lord is not saying that sin has no consequences that follow in our lives (it did in the life of David, Solomon, Samson, and scandalous sin will have its consequences in our life as well). Trust between a minister and congregation may at times be so damaged (due to a public scandalous sin) that a continuation of pastoral relationship is not possible (similar to a divorce within a marriage that occurs due to unfaithfulness).

2. At the same time, the restoration and commissioning of Peter does exhibit the mercy of God in forgiving and using sinful believers to extend His kingdom. God delights to take those who have conspicuously fallen and to make of them trophies of His grace (regardless of how the Lord may subsequently use them). The public restoration of Peter gives to us hope that Christ is not finished with us though we may have miserably failed Him. For the resurrected Christ is a loving Savior and a mighty Savior that comes to us to confront us with our

sin and to restore us, even when we continue to struggle with how we have so miserably failed the Lord. He then sends us forth to serve Him in the calling He has given to us. And even if a Church officer may have broken trust with the Church to such a degree that he cannot continue his ministry, the Lord can and will use those who truly repent and are broken before Him to extend His kingdom in other ways. Our hope is always in the restoring love of Christ.

C. In conclusion, Christ confronts Peter with his sin, but He also shows to Peter His desire to enjoy fellowship with him in spite of his past unfaithfulness in denying Him. This is absolutely amazing. The resurrected and holy Christ desires to have fellowship with one like me, who sins against Him every day. What an incentive to come to Christ. We do not have to force His hand or to bend His arm as it were. He wants to enjoy us, even more than we want to enjoy Him. Just as the resurrected Christ prepared a communion meal for Peter (and the other disciples) along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, so our resurrected Savior comes to us today and every day to lovingly confront us with our unfaithfulness and pride. But He also promises us His forgiveness and usefulness in His kingdom. The resurrected Christ comes to dispel our doubts and fears that we may glorify and enjoy Him forever.

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