

"Love is Proved by Service"
John 21:1-25
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We have arrived at the end of this wonderful Gospel. Chapter 21 is really an epilogue. One definition of an epilogue is a concluding section that rounds out the design of a literary work. As we look back over the Book of John, how is it possible that we can round out or summarize all that has been covered in just 25 verses? In reality, that's exactly what John does, and it is done over a campfire. You could say this is greatest fish story ever told – except this one is true.

In Chapter 20, we find the empty tomb and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, some of the disciples, and then to Thomas. In Verse 2 of today's reading, we see that the disciples are remaining together, but it's interesting that two other disciples are mentioned – but no names are offered.

Why do you think John would write it this way? You have impulsive Peter, doubting Thomas, wise-cracking Nathanael, and the sons Zebedee – also known as the sons of thunder – James & John. Jesus told them to go the mountain in chapter 28, but where are they? At the beach. I don't know about you, but I can relate to these descriptions of the disciples a whole lot better than I can of the committed, courageous, and faithful men they became. That's why I suggest to you, that these unnamed members of the team could easily include me, and knowing a few of you the way I do, they could be you as well.

In verse 3, they're at the Sea of Galilee, and Peter says he's going fishing – they follow his lead and spent the night fishing. And then we get the first true fish story in history – they caught nothing and admitted it! This is actually a significant point. Fishing is what these guys do – it's their trade – they're supposedly experts. Yet, they caught nothing. They failed. Do you think that their failure was an accident? Had they caught fish, it would have changed the impact of the subsequent events.

This is a really important point folks because we don't normally equate failure with God's will. We think of verses like, "With God anything is possible" or "If God is for us who can be against us" – right? Yet, you **must** look at this scene and come to the conclusion that it was God's will that they failed – **and** at something they're supposed experts at? We need to remember this because when things don't go our way or we "fail" at something, it *may be* because God doesn't want it to go your way? A fair question to ask of this statement is "Why?" Well, we can look at this story and see that God needed to teach them a lesson and also be glorified. Another reason might be if we always got our way or won all the time, we may become too confident in our own abilities and become prideful. We'll be talking more about that issue soon.

One other point on this verse. Matthew 28 tells us that Jesus told the 11 disciples to go to the mountain in Galilee – but that’s not where we find them is it? They’re at the beach. It is night, and they go back to what their old life. That’s the way it is when we return to our old ways – it’s dark, and it usually results in a failure.

The Light of the World, the Dayspring greets them on the shore as light dawns – but they don’t recognize Him. He calls out to them – but what does He call them? They’ve been disobedient, they’ve gone back to their old life. Does He call them “Backsliders”? Rebels? Ex-Apostles? Former Disciples? No – He calls them His friends. He then asks a question to which He already knows the answer. Dennis will tell you that is what lawyers are supposed to do – always ask a question you already know the answer. Why? Because you use it to make the person(s) responding admit to something that will help you make your point more emphatically. So, what point is Jesus making with this question? May I suggest it is to make them realize that when you go do something outside the Lord’s will, things aren’t going to go well.

He then tells them to throw their net out on the right side. Why? Because Jesus is always right! Note that, without knowing who this guy on the shore is, they obey Him. Look what happens when you obey the Lord. No more phony fish stories! John perceives that this can only be the work of the Lord and proclaims it to the rest. Now Peter has been taking a beating the last 2-3 chapters because of his denial, but we see here what makes Peter such a great man and why you can see the Lord loves him so. He jumps into the water and swims ashore – he can’t wait to be with his Lord. Oh, how I pray I will have such a zeal for Jesus. The rest of the disciples follow in the boat towing the net full of fish.

So, Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish they have caught, and Peter *alone* dragged the net ashore full of 153 large fish. It’s amazing what we can do physically when we are under the orders of the Lord. Now we need to remember this is basically a duplicate fish story we learned about early in Jesus’ ministry. They don’t catch anything, Jesus tells them to put the net in on the other side, and they make a big haul.

However, there’s one clear difference between the two. What is it? The net didn’t break. When Jesus first did this, he was telling people they could be fishers of men. Envision the net as a type of religion – it may catch many people, but the net will break and many will swim away. With a net woven by the gospel, it catches people, it holds them. Now all of us fish in the net of gospel will try to get out of the net and seek the waters of failures, but believers are kept in the net by the power of God through faith. I believe this is why we’re given a specific number of fish – 153. The Lord knows His own, and He’s going to keep a precise tracking of us.

When Peter got to the shore, he saw fish and bread cooking over some coals. Jesus then offers to feed them breakfast. That’s not the first time Jesus has asked them to come to them. In John 1, He tells them to “Come and see.” In John 7, He tells them

to “Come and drink.” Now, here in Chapter 21, He tells them to come and have breakfast with Him. That is our Lord – He is eager for people to join Him. He loves to have people be with Him. He loves to serve them. Folks, we are children of a very inviting Lord. Are we like that? We have some friends who are amazing at this – they are always inviting us and others over to their house to eat and hang out with them. It’s a great feeling to be invited, and it’s even a better feeling to be with them. We can sense the Lord’s presence.

It’s also interesting to note that it was the food that **Jesus** provided them – not the food they caught. He’s going to soon send these men out to change the world, but He first is going to feed them with His food. Before we go out into the world, we need to sup with the Lord – by feeding on the Word of God.

We now get to a very familiar series of questions that Jesus uses to begin the process of reinstating Peter. Before we get to them, let’s first remind ourselves what Peter has done to warrant the need to be reinstated. In Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels, they have just finished the Lord’s supper. Jesus then tells the disciples they will all fall away and quotes Zechariah of the prophecy that this will happen. Peter then says “even if all fall away, I will not” – Jesus tells him about how he will deny Jesus three times before the rooster crows twice. Peter fights back and says “even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” The others then say the same thing.

Luke’s gospel tells us that the disciples were arguing about who should be considered the greatest, Jesus then teaches them greatness is linked to serving, and then he tells Peter that Satan has asked for him – that he may sift him like wheat, but Jesus tells him He has prayed for him – that his faith might not fail; he then offers the curious statement after promising to pray for him – “and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Peter promises the Lord that he is ready to go with Him – both to prison and to death.

In John’s gospel, Jesus tells the disciples He’s going somewhere they can’t come and has just given the New Commandment – to love one another. Peter wants to know why he can’t follow Him and then says he will lay down his life for Him. Let’s summarize the events that led up to Peter making his claims of faith.

- Celebrating the Lord’s supper – the issue to understand is the sacrifice Jesus is going to make on their behalf.
- Fighting about greatness, but Jesus points out that He is demonstrating greatness – it is rooted in serving.
- The Lord warns Peter Satan is looking to sift him like wheat, but Jesus prays for Him.
- Jesus issues the New Commandment to love one another – that is how they will be identified with Jesus.

In each of these scenes, what are the key words and who are they focused on? – Sacrifice, serving, prays, and love. Jesus is putting **Himself** in the position of either being the role model of how we're to conduct ourselves or **He** issues a prayer/commandment that is in the interest of their safety and conduct. Do you see any reason that a follower of Jesus would look at these scenarios and feel a sense of self-worth? Yet, Peter's responses are anything but reflective of Who he should be drawing his strength from. What is Peter's problem? – Pride.

Scripture has a lot to say about pride – and none of it is good. Let's take a look at some of them:

- Psalm 10:4: In his **pride** the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.
- Proverbs 11:2a: When **pride** comes, then comes disgrace
- Proverbs 13:10a: Where there is strife, there is **pride**
- Proverbs 14:3a: A fool's mouth lashes out with **pride**
- Proverbs 16:18: **Pride** goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

I can look back on my life's major failures, and I see my pride being the matchstick that lit the fuse that led to the bombs that went off and caused terrible suffering and pain. Had I been a better man of God and leaned on Jesus as opposed to my own abilities (now I see them as inabilities), it would have saved a lot of heartache in my family's and my life. I stand before you today because of the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ and my wife and family. However, it has taken time, and stripping oneself of one's pride is not easy. Jesus has had to make some painful realizations in my life to begin to chip away at this prideful heart. He still has a long way to go.

In the Greek, there are four words used of "love." The first one is Storge – like the affection one feels for a puppy. The second word is Eros – this is a sensual kind of love. The Greeks made Eros a god and put it together with Aphrodite. Today these are known as Venus and Cupid. This is Hollywood's idea of love, but it is not found anywhere in the Word of God. A third word for love in the Greek is Phileo – it basically means friendship – a brotherly love. We get words like philanthropic and Philadelphia – known as the city of brotherly love. Finally, we get to Agapao – (aka "agape") giving for the sake of giving; never expecting anything in return. This is the love that describes God's love.

Now keeping these different types of love in mind, we get to the famous three questions Jesus uses to begin the process of reinstating Peter. He uses these questions to reveal the core issue behind Peter's pride – the kind of love he is loving with. It has to happen – the process of repenting and being sanctified (set apart – made holy) – can be quite painful, and the Lord is determined to do it. Why? Because He wants to

use us, but He can't use us to our fullest when we're living our lives with pride or anything else that prevents complete surrender and obedience.

So, we get to the first of Jesus' questions. John 21:15a: "Simon son of John, do you [agape] love me more than these?" Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him in a God-like way – an agape love. He adds onto the question "more than these." Who are these? Could it be the other disciples? Could it be the fish representing his old way of life? Regardless of who "these" are, the point the Lord is making is does Peter love Jesus above all things. How does Peter respond? John 21:15b: "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I [phileo] love you." He confirms he loves the Lord, but in a phileo way. Why do you think Peter wouldn't respond using agape? Well, he's probably learned his lesson that bragging about his devotion to the Lord gets him in trouble. Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter with his response – He commissions him to feed His lambs. Notice that Jesus tells him to start with the lambs – lambs could be interpreted as either children or new believers. Teaching kids forces you to be clear and to the point – this is an important ability when teaching the Scriptures.

In the second interrogation in John 21:16a, Jesus again asks Peter if he agape loves Him. Peter responds again with an affirmation of his phileo love for the Lord. The Lord again ignores the different word for love Peter uses and commands him to take care of his sheep. Now he's talking about taking care of the sheep. He's invoking the need that the people who are going to confess Jesus as their Lord are going to be need to be tended to. Peter is to feed the baby sheep, but he is to shepherd or discipline the grown-up sheep. Why? Because the baby sheep follow the grown-up sheep, so they need to set the right example.

In the third interrogation John 21:17a, Jesus changes the type of love Peter has for him – now He uses phileo. In other words, Jesus is asking, 'Will you at least love me like a friend?' Peter feels the change in the wording and is hurt by this. He's probably still feeling the sting of his failure in denying the Lord three times, and he has now heard the Lord ask him if he loves the Him **three** times – the last one signifying where Peter was in terms of the kind of love he had for Jesus.

This is an important point for us. Clearly, if we're honest, we are not always loving Jesus in an agape way. We need to remember that the Lord does not come to condemn us – He meets us where we are and will take us as far as we want to go. He then begins the process of proving Himself worthy of being loved in an agape way. Again, Jesus doesn't skip a beat with Peter's response and instructs him to feed His sheep. I believe the Lord is telling Peter that a critical component of tending to the sheep is feeding them. That is what we are doing here – we are feeding on the Word of God. This is how God tends to us – He gives us ministries such as POW for us sheep to come and be fed by Him – by His Word.

The very next thing Jesus does after reinstating Peter is He tells him that his life is going to change, and He's going to die in a similar manner in which Jesus did – by the cross. Church history tells us that Peter did indeed die on a cross, but because He didn't feel worthy to be killed the same way his Lord did, he was crucified upside down. It is interesting that this would be the way Peter would die as when we saw him deny the Lord, he was in fear of ending up in a similar deadly situation – with the Holy Spirit leading Peter, there would be no denial the second time he's faced with dying for Christ. Jesus finishes His reinstatement of Peter in verses 18-19 the same way He started with him – by telling Peter to follow ***Him***.

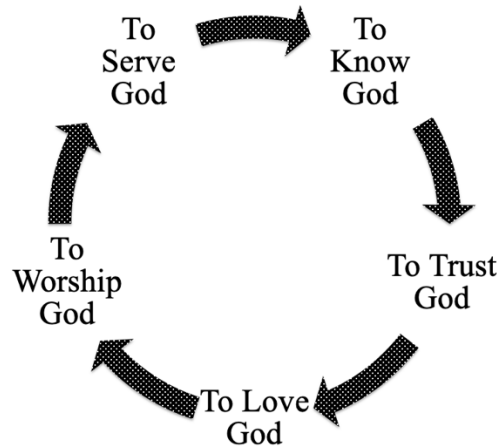
Peter being Peter, ignores the Lord's command and turns and looks at John and asks, "What about him?" Jesus rebukes Peter by telling him "What's it to you?" He then repeats His final command to Peter with some additional emphasis – that he ***must*** follow Jesus. As we read the gospel accounts, there was, at the very least, a competition between Peter and John – probably for the approval of Jesus. Why do we know that John was the disciple that Jesus loved? Because John tells us. When Mary Magdalene told them the tomb was empty, John made sure we knew that he beat Peter to the tomb. These guys were very different. Peter was the brash, take-charge kind of guy. John was more mystical – yet, he must have had some temper issues since he was labeled along with his brother James a "son of thunder."

The key issue in these verses is that Jesus wants us to follow Him and not worry about how blessed or favored other fellow believers are. Instead of competing against each other, we need to be ***complementing*** each other – recognizing each of us have our own gifts, and they all contribute to the body of Christ. Jesus then reminds us of two things in His final statement in this gospel:

1. He is telling Peter that He has the authority of how long John – and the rest of us will live. Only God can make a statement like that.
2. Second, and this is what we are all waiting for, is that He is coming back.

John finishes the gospel certifying that his testimony is true and then tells us that if He were to attempt to document all that He learned about the Lord during His 3 years with Him, the whole world couldn't hold the books that would be written about Him. That's a lot of books. But God is a very big God.

Well, we've arrived at the end of this great book of the Bible. John's theme throughout this Gospel is that Jesus is God. But He doesn't stop there. Not only are we to understand that Jesus is God, we are to get an understanding of who God is. This should be our life-long single most important objective. Below is a diagram of a progression when we seek to know God.



Each step follows the previous one. It's also a continuous process – as we come to know God, we learn to trust Him more. As we come to know and trust Him more, we love Him more. Out of our love for Him, we worship Him. We then serve Him as a form of worship and a response to our knowing, trusting, and loving Him. As we proceed on this process, God reveals Himself to us more and more – deepening our resolve to know Him, trust Him, love Him, worship Him, and serve Him. This goes on and on until He calls us home.

As I have said before, the primary theme of John's gospel is Jesus is God. A reasonable question to ask in response to this theme is, 'Why is this so important?' Another way to approach this issue is to ask the question what would life be like if Jesus wasn't God? There are many things to think about with this question, but I want to offer 5 key points.

1. **Prophecy wouldn't be fulfilled** - Isaiah 53:5: "But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed." There are over 300 prophecies speaking of Jesus as the Messiah. I've chosen just one of them here in Isaiah 53:5. If Jesus wasn't God, every one of them would be invalidated.
2. **We wouldn't see a human example of God the Father's character** - John 14:9b: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." John 10:30: "I and my Father are one." Up until Jesus arrived on Earth in human form, God was difficult to relate to – not because He didn't make it possible, it was just our limited understanding of things of the spirit from a human perspective. With Jesus' arrival, our human understanding of God was now more relatable.
3. **There would be no resurrection – we would still be in our sins and not forgiven** - Romans 6:4: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For

He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Jesus was raised from the dead because He was the only acceptable sacrifice to the Father for permanent forgiveness of sins. His acceptability to the Father is validated in His resurrection. As a result, because our belief in this truth, we have forgiveness of sins.

4. **We would not have the Holy Spirit living in us** - Romans 8:11: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” 2 Corinthians 1:22: “who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”
5. **God would be a liar** - Titus 1:2: “God cannot lie.” This circles us back to the first verse in John’s gospel – clearly stating Jesus is God – In the beginning, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All Scripture is God breathed, so to deny Jesus is God is, in effect, calling God a liar. Titus 1:2 states plainly that God cannot lie, so He can’t be a liar. If He can’t be a liar, then what He says is true. What He says is Jesus is God. Do you believe this?

We are a lot like the disciples – we love being with Jesus and are amazed at His power, wisdom, mercy and love. Despite our love and devotion to Jesus, we are going to fail from time to time – typically when we don’t obey what He asks us to do. Jesus is not a God of judgment and condemnation – He is a God of forgiveness and restoration. He invites us to join Him, and He wants to feed and serve us. For all of these things, He simply wants us to follow Him.

The disciples spent three years living, eating, and walking with Jesus, and John tells us documenting that experience would overwhelm the world. But we have one thing the disciples didn’t have at this point in the story - living proof that ***the world has already been overwhelmed***. We have the Holy Spirit – the living God – living in us testifying that all we’ve read in this Gospel is true. Jesus is God. He died for our sins. He was resurrected. He is alive. He’s coming back – I believe very soon. The Holy Spirit is God’s down payment for our redemption. We know it because He confirms it in us constantly. This chapter, this Gospel, this book is a love letter from our Creator, our Savior, and our Lord. He is worthy of our trust, worthy of our love, worthy of our worship, worthy of our service, and worthy of our praise. Amen? Let’s pray.