

Restoring A Wounded Healer

John 21.15-17

John 21 is all about Peter, who became leader of the early church. It isn't a flattering picture – we are reminded that he still had 'feet of clay' – but what we discover is an affirmation of God's love, grace, and forgiveness, something every believer needs today.

The background to this encounter

- Peter is part of the "inner circle" of disciples closest to Jesus
- Jesus famously approves, and rebukes, Peter (Mt. 16)!
- In Jesus' hour of greatest need, Peter denies Him! (Jn. 19)
- In the wake of this, Peter is unconsolable (Lk. 22.62)

Time has passed, but the pain lingers, deep within...

Three Lessons from Jesus' Words to Peter

- *God is interested in restoration, not condemnation (He's not holding our sins against us)*
- *Heartfelt love is what God is looking for (not a commitment to never sin again)*
- *Jesus wants us to 'care for His sheep'*

John 21.15-17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He replied, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." Jesus said a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved that He asked him a third time, "Do you love Me?" He said, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

2024 was a bad year for pastors in Texas. At least a dozen pastors of large evangelical churches, representing more than 50,000 attenders, stepped down from ministry due to moral failure. Perhaps the best-known was Tony Evans, pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, and head of the Urban Alternative ministry. Christians grieved at this blight on the name of Christ. Cynics, especially those who don't share a faith in Jesus Christ, relished in this ecclesiastical mess. They mocked Christians as pharisaical hypocrites.

Last week, Tony Evans was in the news again. After a year of pastoral counseling, he publicly apologized and was restored to full fellowship. Many praised the church for its careful and biblical restoration process; others mocked it as a 'cover-up' and 'business as usual' for megachurch pastors. Many today treat pastors who publicly fall into sin as pariahs, marked with a 'scarlet letter,' a spiritual wound that can never heal. But anyone familiar with Scripture knows that nothing could be further from the way God reacts to sinning saints.

As we will see today, our judgmental tendencies reflect our self-righteous culture, in which we prop up our own piety by trampling and crucifying the character of others who publicly sin. Many Christians have adopted a perseverance theology: This is the Calvinist idea that those fail to ‘persevere’ in their Christian lives – meaning they get caught committing sin, and especially what we would judge to be a “bad” sin, show that they were never really saved in the first place. This leads to us arbitrarily ‘rating’ sins. Those who we deem guilty are treated as irredeemable, as if they’ve committed the ‘unpardonable sin.’ The result of this holier-than-thou theology is that in the modern church, “We shoot our wounded!”

The background to the dialogue between Jesus and Peter that we have read this morning fits this scenario perfectly. The story is well-known. I suspect Peter, although he’s in heaven as I speak, might still wince at its retelling. But the Spirit had it recorded in Scripture, I submit, not for us to malign him, but for us to marvel at God’s grace and complete restoration. That is what we are going to see this morning.

The background to this encounter

The setting is this: Jesus has just supernaturally provided the disciples with a huge catch of fish, then served them breakfast on the beach of the Sea of Galilee. This is only the third time in at least as many weeks that Jesus has met with the disciples since His resurrection. As they finish eating their breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus speaks to Peter. To understand the full significance of their brief dialogue, we need to be reminded of who Peter was, his role as a leader of the disciples, and the sin that prompted Jesus to speak to him.

Peter was in the “inner circle” of disciples closest to Jesus. Peter was one of the first disciples Jesus called by Jesus. After a miraculous catch of fish, he left everything to follow him. He often acted as a spokesman for the other disciples, and Jesus healed his mother-in-law. During a storm, he climbed out of a boat and walked on water to Jesus. Jesus took him, along with James and John, when He was transfigured on a mountain and appeared with Moses and Elijah. Before Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He took Peter, James, and John to be closer to Him as He prayed. By any measure, Peter was a recognized leader of the disciples.

Jesus famously approves, and rebukes, Peter (Mt. 16)!

Peter made some of the most profound statements of any of the disciples, and some of the most foolish ones, too. In Matt. 16, when Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, Peter made his famous confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus applauded Peter for saying that. But just a few verses later, when Jesus tells them that He is going to be arrested and put to death, Peter declares, “This will never happen to You!”, and Jesus replies, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s!” And this sets the stage for Peter’s worst failing...

In Jesus’ hour of greatest need, Peter denies Him three times!

Who could ever forget the events of that terrible night, when Jesus was betrayed by one of His disciples, Judas, arrested by the Jewish leaders, falsely accused, and the next morning put to death! But for Peter, what marked that night as personally disastrous was him denying that he knew Jesus three times. After he proudly declared in front of all the disciples that if everyone else left Jesus, he never would, and that he was

ready to die for Jesus, he had proved himself a hypocrite by denying Jesus!

In the wake of this, Peter is unconsolable (Lk. 22.62)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that after denying Jesus three times, Peter was inconsolable. He went out and wept bitterly. If he had been one of the lesser disciples, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad. But he was their leader. He was their spokesman. Jesus had personally recognized him as such. And he had failed Jesus miserably.

Time has passed, but the pain lingers, deep within...

It's now some weeks later. We are on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has given them a huge catch of fish, just as He did when He first called Peter to follow Him. When Peter learns that Jesus is on the shore, he jumps out of the boat to swim to Him. But I wonder: Did he have second thoughts as he swam to the shore? Perhaps the memory of his threefold denial of Jesus came back to him. When he reached the shore, we don't know what he said to Jesus. Was he hoping for some way to express his remorse for what he did? We don't know the answer to these questions, but we do know what Jesus asked him in front of the other disciples.

Three times, Jesus asked Peter the same question: Referring to him in a formal way, not in an informal and friendly way, He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Three times, Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Three times, Jesus then said to him, "Feed (or Shepherd) My sheep (or lambs)." The only reason for Jesus to ask three times is because Peter denied Him three times.

But what Jesus said to Peter, and just as important, what He *didn't* say to Peter, is what we must not miss. Because what they reveal is how different God's attitude toward a wounded believer is than what our attitude often is. Let's embrace three lessons from Jesus' words to Peter.

Three Lessons from Jesus' Words to Peter

- *God is interested in restoration, not condemnation (He's not holding our sins against us)*

First, God is interested in restoration, not condemnation. We can see this because Jesus *doesn't* ask Peter, "Do you realize how badly what you did hurt Me? Have you repented of your sin? Will you commit to never do anything like that again?" In fact, Jesus makes no reference to Peter's failure. He could have had Peter pleading for forgiveness. He doesn't mention sin or guilt. Those burdens weigh us down. Jesus didn't want to condemn Peter for what he had done; He wanted to restore him to the place of fellowship he had before his denials.

This shouldn't surprise us. It's true for everyone. Jesus said, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3.17). Paul wrote that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5.19). God isn't keeping a tally of our sins. Many Christians have a "Santa Claus" God: They think 'He's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice...' We think God does that because we do that.

But what is God like? Just ask David – a man who failed spectacularly! He committed adultery, then attempted to

cover it up by committing murder. His sin – like all sin – had its results. But instead of throwing David onto the trash heap of history, God forgave him. In Psalm 103.8-12, David wrote of God’s heart:

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

You see, God is in the restoration business – and we should be, too. Listen to Scripture...

*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...
(Galatians 6.1)*

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5.19-20)

Instead of joining in the ‘condemnation chorus,’ we should be in the ‘restoration choir’ – not beating them up for their sin, but rescuing them from sin. When we do that, we reflect God’s heart.

- *Heartfelt love is what God is looking for
(not a commitment to never sin again)*

The second thing that we learn from Jesus here is that God is looking for heartfelt love. Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love Me?” A cynic will say, “A person can say anything. Talk’s cheap!” Jesus could’ve said, “Peter, do you promise to never deny Me again? Peter, I need a firm commitment from you that you’ll never do that again!” Instead, it was simply, “Do you love Me?”

How many times have I stumbled into sin, and even made a commitment to never do it again? How many times have you? Who hasn’t experienced the persistent battle with sin? In his first epistle, John writes, “*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” But then he immediately adds, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 Jn. 1.8-9). No matter how hard we try, we’re going to battle with sin.

But Jesus knew what was important. What matters is our hearts. *Do I love Jesus? Do I recognize the price He paid to give me eternal life? Remembering what He did for me restores my love for Him.* We all battle with sin, but if we love the Lord, we’ll confess our sin, and God will forgive it.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, He didn’t speak about holiness or purity or turning from sin. Yes, those things are all vital to our Christian lives, but they aren’t the root; they’re the fruit. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

all your mind” (Matt. 22.37). A victorious life happens when we have love for God in our hearts.

- *Jesus wants us to ‘care for His sheep’*

The final lesson from Jesus’ words to Peter are simply this: Instead of focusing on our sin, God wants us to love Him, and as a result of this, to ‘care for His sheep’!

If there is one thing I could impress on every Christian, it is this: *God wants to use you!* So many Christians think they are unqualified or disqualified from serving Jesus Christ, because of something they’ve done. Every time they think about doing something for God, Satan dredges up some dirty deed from their past and whispers that they aren’t ministry material. It’s a lie and he knows it. (But then, he’s the father of lies!)

And you know what’s amazing? God wants to turn your past failures into future ministry. Peter denied Christ three times. How could he ever proclaim Christ again? Jesus restored him by getting him to focus not on his failure, but on his love. And Peter went on to become a powerful (but not perfect!) leader in the early church.

I talked with a woman on the phone this week. She called asking for help dealing with her anger at the church in town that was putting on an immoral show for children. I’m angry about it, too. I hate that a church that claims to follow Christ endorses sin that Christ died for. But I also know that sin has been with us since the fall. It was there in Jesus’ day. I could protest sin, but that wouldn’t stop it. So what should our response be?

In the course of our conversation, I mentioned to her that sin is prevalent in our society – and I mentioned abortion as one of the ways Satan is working. She began weeping over the phone, and shared how 40 years ago, at the age of 18, she succumbed to pressure from her mother, and aborted a baby. She said that to this day, 40 years later, she is still dealing with guilt for what she did.

I had the joy of affirming to her that Jesus died for that sin, and all her sin, and that His forgiveness was not limited, or conditional. It was absolute, and complete. Her confession – her recognition that what she did was sin, was her agreement with God, and as 1 John 1.9 says, God forgives our sin.

I then pointed her to 2 Corinthians 1, where we read that God comforts us in our afflictions – all the things Satan burdens us with in this life – in order that we can in turn comfort others who are going through the same things we went through. God was not finished with her. In fact, God doesn’t waste any experience in our lives. He wants to use us to minister His love and grace to others who are going through the same struggles we have come through!

Peter was wounded, but God wanted him to be a healer in the church. So Jesus restored him.

Tony Evans was wounded, but God wants him to be able to help others heal from their sin. So Jesus restores him.

You and I are often wounded. Perhaps you are holding deep inside this morning a wound Satan reminds you of whenever you consider doing something for God.

Jesus is in the business of restoration. If you haven't yet, right now, you can confess that sin to God. Tell Him that you agree with Him that it is sin. As you confess it, He promises that He will forgive it. Knowing that your sin is forgiven, affirm your love for Jesus, and then look for a way you can care for Jesus' sheep. Get ready: God wants to use *you* to restore others.

Peter had denied Jesus three times the night He was betrayed...But when Jesus met him on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, He three times asked, "Do you love Me?", and after Peter replied in the affirmative, said, "Tend (Shepherd) My sheep." A title for a sermon on this passage might be: "The Wounded Healer: How Jesus Restored Peter".

God is in the 'restoration' business...see Gal 6.1; Jas 5.19-20.

Jesus isn't counting our sins against us -- not keeping a record of our sins. 2 Cor. 5.19 We do that. We remember what someone has done to us...for years. Not God. Jesus said if we'd seen Him, we'd seen the Father. Jesus reveals the God we cannot see. And what this reflects is that God isn't keeping a tally of sins.

Second, Jesus isn't looking for us to make a commitment not to sin. He could've said, "Peter, do you promise to never deny Me again?" "Peter, I need a firm commitment from you that you'll never do that again!" No...it was simply, "Do you love Me?"

Thirdly, tend My sheep. 3x Jesus said it to Peter. How to show our love for Jesus. Care for His sheep! We've all been where Peter was. Not the exact situation, of course...but we've all known what it's like to fail spiritually. And we wonder how to be restored. Jesus shows us how... Forgetting what lies behind... Phil. 3.12-14

Digging Deeper

1. The background to Jesus' dialogue with Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in John 21.15-17 includes not just Peter's denial, but the overall reputation Peter had as Jesus' disciple. Think back over the Gospels' accounts involving Peter. What stands out to you? For a review of events involving Peter, read these sections of Matthew: 4.18-20; 8.14-17; 14.22-33; 16.13-20, 21-23; 17.1-8; 18.21ff; 19.27-30. Now review the setting of Peter's denial (his words to Jesus in the Upper Room, then his words after Jesus' arrest): Matt. 26.33-35, 69-75; Mark 14.29-30, 66-72; Luke 22.31-34, 54-62; John 13.36-38; 18.15-18, 25-27). Do you feel his inner torment, having experienced such spiritual 'highs,' and now falling to such a spiritual 'low'?
2. Let's engage in a little 'sanctified reading-between-the-lines'! John tells Peter that the man on the shore is Jesus, and Peter impulsively jumps into the water and swims to shore. Does his excitement at seeing Jesus wane as he is swimming – remembering his threefold denial of Jesus the night He was betrayed? What do you think he said to Jesus on the shore before the others arrived (we aren't told)? Would he be wishing for some adequate way to express his remorse for his denials of Jesus? Why do you think Jesus waited until all the others were there (and they had finished breakfast) to confront Peter about his love? Why did Jesus, the first time He questioned Peter, say, "Do you love Me *more than* these?" Who or what did He mean by "these"? What had Peter proudly said in the presence of the other disciples in the Upper Room?
3. Jesus addresses Peter as "Simon, son of John" each time He asks His question. The *only other time* Jesus addresses Peter this way in the Gospel is in John 1.42, when they first meet. This is a more formal way of addressing someone – and perhaps less familiar. How would this reflect Jesus' questioning Peter's love for Him?
4. Jesus probably asked Peter His question three times because Peter denied Him three times. What did Jesus ask him to affirm? What did Jesus never mention? What did Peter's love qualify him to do? Do you *love* Jesus? Do you express it to Him? How do you show it?