



April 15, 2012
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*Loaded Questions:
Do You Love Me?
John 21:15-19*

In 2004, I had the incredible privilege of visiting the land of the Holy One. One of my most powerful experiences on the trip happened while I took an early morning walk on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As the sun was starting to rise, I sat down and began to imagine the scene in John 21. I imagined Peter and the guys out there fishing in their boat with nothing to show for it except fatigue and frustration. I imagined what they must have thought when some stranger on the shore asked them, "Haven't you caught anything?" (the absolute worst question you can ask a fisherman in this situation). I tried to understand why they obliged when that same stranger suggested they throw the net over the starboard side. As soon as they did, the fish piled in; and they quickly realized that it was no stranger on the shore. I wondered what it must have been like to realize that it was the risen Jesus. I imagined the smells of the fire and the fish and the bread. I imagined the wonder of the disciples as they stared at the Risen Jesus – their minds swirling, "Is it really Him? Yes, of course it's Him!" And I couldn't help but to imagine Peter, swimming toward the shore as fast as he could, climbing out of the water with heavy breath – wet and cold, sitting near the fire to warm up and looking into the eyes of His Lord as He knelt near the flames to prepare the meal. As I tried to imagine what must have been going through Peter's mind, I was instantly overwhelmed with emotion; I spent the next several minutes crying out in thanksgiving because of the gracious call of God.

Do you remember the last time that Peter was warming himself by a fire and looking into the eyes of Jesus? Just weeks before, exactly as predicted, Peter was warming himself by the fire near the house where Jesus was being held in arrest. Peter denied that he knew Jesus once, and then again, and then a third time. Then, as the rooster gave notice to the dawn, Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter. With the look of Jesus, Peter's whole body responded in conviction as he ran away and wept bitterly. How awful that must have been! Now, in John 21, it's dawn again, Peter is once again warming himself by a fire and looking through the rising smoke at the risen Jesus. I wonder if the smell of the fire in the morning air took Peter right back to the memory of his sin and the price Jesus paid for it. Can you imagine what Peter must have been going through?

Take a moment to think about it from your own perspective. What is the sin in your life that you are most ashamed of? Do you remember where you were? Can you go back to that dorm room, or that playground, or that office, or that

computer screen, or that car, or that business trip, or that house? Can you remember the smells, the sounds, and the surroundings? Most of us don't have our greatest failures writ large for the world to examine like Peter does. In fact, most of us have kept the sin we have in mind buried deep where no one will ever see it. But for Peter, Jesus predicted it, and he looked him straight in the eye as soon as he had done the deed. Even so, on this morning, around this fire, Jesus had something new for Peter.

There is powerful truth in our scripture today. If we miss it, we'll never understand what it really means to be loved by Jesus and to love Him back. Look with me now at John 21: 15-19.

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

[Prayer of Illumination]

As they finished their breakfast, Jesus was ready for his anticipated conversation with Peter. And perhaps, the way that Peter had taken Jesus aside only months earlier to rebuke him, now Jesus takes Peter aside to restore him. Jesus says, "Simon, son of John." Did you notice that? He doesn't call him by his loving and prophetic nickname – Peter. Like when your parents wanted your complete attention, Jesus calls him by his official name. He asks him, "Do you love me more than these?" What a hard question! Do you know what "these" Jesus is asking about? Most likely he is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than the other disciples do. It's a hard question to swallow, but if you consider the whole story of Peter perhaps it is exactly the right question for Jesus to pose. Look back to John 13 for one example. Jesus is sharing the Last Supper with the disciples and he tells them that he's going to be leaving them. Verse 36 says, "Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." (Verse 37) Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Do you see how Peter separated himself from the others? Jesus answered by predicting his threefold denial. Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter is in a different place now. He's still the leader, but he's not willing to make any

grandiose claims about loving Jesus more than all the other disciples. Rather he simply points back to Jesus' knowledge of his heart. 'Yes Lord, you know deep down how I love you.'

Jesus asked him two more times, "Do you love me?" And Peter responded the same way, "Jesus, you know my heart for you, I do love you." But after the third ask, something clicked in Peter's mind. Verse 17 tells us that "Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time." Do you think Peter connected the repeated questions to his repeated denial of Jesus? Yeah... ouch. But even though it hurt, I think, later, Peter would be grateful; because Jesus was leading him through some work that Peter had to get done to be restored to his God-given mission.

So, was Peter forgiven? Yes. How do you know? Did Jesus say, "I forgive you Peter"? No. Did Jesus say, "Ah man, don't worry about it bro; it's all good"? No. How do we know that Peter is forgiven? We know because of the way that Jesus responded to Peter's confessions of love. What did he say in response to Peter? (Verse 15) "Feed my lambs." (Verse 16) "Take care of my sheep." (Verse 17) "Feed my sheep." Jesus gives Peter a job to do of the utmost importance. That's how we know that Peter is forgiven; Jesus restores him to the call of God. "Do you love me, Peter? Yes, Jesus. Then, Peter, be about my business."

Jesus wants Peter to know that loving Jesus means doing His work with His people. It means taking care of the people that God puts in his care. It means action more than feeling. There is a huge call on Peter's life to lead Jesus' work after Jesus ascends to the Father. Love for Jesus is the centerpiece of that work; it's the most important quality for Peter to possess – not charisma or leadership skills or great preaching or humor or courage or perseverance or good behavior. Love is the most important quality for Peter to have, because his love for Jesus is going to cost him everything.

Look at verse 18, Jesus told Peter, "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Peter's love for Jesus meant that he would face persecution and, ultimately, an unnatural death – but God would use all of it for His glory.

Yet, it does seem like an odd pep talk to give to Peter. "Do you love me Peter? Alright, then take care of my sheep. And after many years of faithful service to me, just so you know, you're going to be persecuted and eventually you're going to be killed. Now go get 'em!" Why would Jesus say this to Peter? Well, perhaps it was to help Peter learn that discipleship includes hard stuff; it includes persecution and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Perhaps it was to help Peter remember that when he was in the midst of suffering he wouldn't consider it a punishment

from God for his denial of Jesus, but rather he would know that it was bringing glory to God. Of course, we know that Peter **did** learn that. Listen to what he writes in 1 Peter 4:12-13, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." Eventually, Peter gets it. He's come a long way from the guy who pulled Jesus aside for rebuke. I love the way Dale Bruner summarizes this point. He says, "It's the way we lose, more than even the way we 'win,' if the Gospel is to be believed, that brings the greater glory to God."

In this wonderful scene we see the gracious work of Jesus to restore Peter in love to the mission of God. Jesus charges Peter to keep focused on loving Jesus by taking care of God's people. Jesus teaches Peter that love means action, forgiveness means there's a job to do, and following Jesus means that he can face suffering with hope for God's glory.

Do you love the Lord? Do you? Is it as real as your love for your best friends? Is it as passionate as your love for college football? Is it as deep as your love for your children? Do you really love the Lord? How would someone else know? How is your love for the Lord evidenced in your life?

Jesus makes it clear that loving Him should be evidenced by taking care of those that God entrusts to you. But is that only a message for pastors or church leaders? No. Who has God entrusted to you? If you are a parent, God has entrusted your children to you. Parents, is the way you love Jesus evident in the way you have raised your children? Are you teaching them to really love Jesus? Are you teaching them to give up their whole life for His sake? Do they see you giving up your life for His sake? How many of you are in a LifeGroup or some kind of Christian small group? If you are in a LifeGroup, God has entrusted that group to each other; are you working throughout the week to shepherd each other toward total surrender to Jesus? Jesus says, if you love me, this is what I want you to do, shepherd the people I have entrusted to you. How many of you have neighbors? How many of you have clients for your business? How many of you supervise other people at work? How many of you are sitting with other people in a sanctuary? I believe that every one of us has people that God has entrusted to us. When Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" it is **totally** a loaded question. When Peter responds, Jesus doesn't simply say, "thanks." He gives him a job with eternal significance. Do you love Jesus? If you do, the Lord invites and expects you to get on board with the work He wants to do in the world. Will you?

One of the prayers I say often is this: "Lord Jesus, help me to love you." The fact is, though, that some of you are really held up in your love for God because you're still sitting in that place I asked you to imagine earlier – the place of your most shameful sin. You know about Jesus, you know that He was the God the Son sent to demonstrate God's incredible love by living a life of service and then dying an innocent death on a guilt-ridden cross. Yet, you're not sure if God can really

forgive you for what you have done. Therefore, you are not fully free to love Jesus back. Every single one of us struggles with that in some way, but some of you this morning, no matter how long you've been coming to church or have called yourself a Christian, have never really gotten past that. Do you know the forgiveness of Jesus, like Peter did that morning by the lake?

I believe there is probably some work that every single one of us needs to do this morning. Would you please put aside any distractions right now? Let's move right into a time of prayer. With your eyes closed, can you imagine again that place of your most shameful sin? Go ahead; go there in your mind's eye. How did it sound? How did it look? How did you feel? How did it smell? Are you there? I know for some of you it's extremely painful to even think about it, but if you want to understand the extent of God's love for you, this is something we have to do. Do you have the image in your mind? Now imagine as you look at that scene from the outside that Jesus is there – right there in that crappy place of your sin. You have to let him into that space. Can you imagine him showing you the scars on his hands and on his feet? What is it that Jesus is saying to you in that place? Take a few moments now, to simply listen to the Lord.

Perhaps the Risen Lord, right there in the midst of your sinfulness is asking you, Do you love me? What is your answer? Jesus loves you. By his wounds you are healed. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, and **behold**, the new has come. You are forgiven in Christ. Do you love Him? Then take care of His sheep.

[Prayer] Lord Jesus, thank you. Thank you for the way that you enter the darkest places of our lives to bring your truth and light. Thank you that you called Peter, the one who failed you to lead in your church. Thank you that you call each of us, ones who have also failed you to care for Your people. Help us, Holy Spirit, to love the Lord, with all our hearts, and all our souls, and all our minds, and all our strength. May your love for us compel us to be about your business in the world... for your Kingdom to come, and your will to be done. Amen.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. How does this passage help us understand God's forgiveness?
 2. What do you think is significant about Jesus' response to Peter's confession of love?
 3. Do you love the Lord? How is that evidenced in your life?
 4. What is it that the Lord is asking of you in this Scripture and sermon?