

207. The Gospel of John 20:1-14

Lessons in True Love-Part 1
A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
(1-29-23)

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Last week, in our study of John's Gospel—we finished Chapter 20 which ended with verses 30-31:

John 20:30–31 (NKJV)

³⁰ And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

John could have ended his Gospel with those words, they would have made for a powerful ending—but instead chose to add an 'epilogue' or a 'postscript' which we call Chapter 21. This has caused many to wonder why he didn't finish his book with the dramatic ending of verses 30-31 but instead felt the need to add another chapter.

The answer to that so-called 'mystery' is that—John did not want to end his Gospel without telling his readers that Peter had been restored to his apostleship.

Before John inserted Chapter 21 into his Gospel—the last time he wrote about Peter (except for a brief mention at the beginning of Chapter 20 where Peter and John went to the tomb early the Sunday of Jesus' resurrection)—was when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times the morning of Jesus' trial before Caiphias and the Jewish High Council (the Sanhedrin) in Chapter 18.

If John had not included Chapter 21 which tells us how the Lord restored Peter back to fellowship with Himself (Jesus) and back to his apostleship—we wouldn't understand how he became so prominent as a leader in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts. But not only that, this chapter teaches us some very important lessons about true love (the love of God)—and how it works its way out of our lives to touch others around us.

So, this section is defining true love from God's perspective—and it could be applied to our marriages or to any other human relationship that we have as Christians.

I. True Love is not Words—it's a Commitment.

John 21:1-3a (NKJV)

¹ After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias [also known as the 'Sea of Galilee'], and in this way He showed *Himself*: ² Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the *sons* of Zebedee [James and John], and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing."...

It appears to me that Peter was giving up and going back to the old life—the life that Jesus had called him away from to become a '*fisher of men*' three and a half years earlier.

He said, “I’m going fishing”—but I believe what Peter was really saying is, “I’m going back to fishing. It was an exciting three years guys—but it’s over. It’s time to go back to our old lives and careers—I’m going fishing.”

And being the natural born leader that he was, the other disciples responded—“We are going with you also.” (verse 3a)

John 21:3b–5 (NKJV)

³ ...They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. ⁴ But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Children, have you any food [in other words, ‘did you catch anything?’]” They answered Him, “No.” ⁶ And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. ⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved [John] said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”...

Let me stop and make an observation—there is quite a difference between ‘self-directed’ service and ‘God-directed’ service.

Service that is directed by the Lord is always going to be fruitful (maybe not as fruitful as you would like—but the fruit will definitely be forthcoming).

So often that which we do in our ministry for the Lord is often fruitless and frustrating because it’s being done in the energy of our flesh and not according to the direction and power of the Holy Spirit.

But service directed by the Lord (notice how certain and specific the Lord is: ‘Cast your nets on the right side of the boat, and you will find some’)—God-directed service always yields results!

➔ Listen for Pastor Chuck’s testimony of 17 years of fruitless, frustrating ministry...

Pastor Chuck, using this passage in John 21 to teach pastors about success in the ministry went on to say—*“Whenever the nets of ministry get so full that you can’t draw them in, you know there is only one explanation for it—it is the Lord!”*

Now let me remind you that something very similar to this (in John 21:5-6) took place when Jesus *first* called these men to leave their fishing nets behind and follow Him, promising to make them fishers of men—something that wasn’t lost to John:

Luke 5:1–11 (NKJV)

¹ So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret [Sea of Galilee], ² and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing *their* nets. ³ Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. ⁴ When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵ But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” ⁶ And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. ⁷ So they signaled to *their* partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw *it*, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also *were* James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” ¹¹ So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him.

John 21:7–9 (NKJV)

⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” **Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea.** ⁸ **But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits [about 300 feet]), dragging the net with fish.** ⁹ **Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread.**

By the time they reached the shore Jesus had prepared a breakfast of charcoaled fish and bread for the hungry disciples.

One commentator said—

*“All night long the disciples had been looking for fish—when all the while, Jesus had it right at hand, freshly grilled, ready to eat. Jesus had their breakfast all ready—broiled **fish** and **bread**. We do not know whether the Lord caught these fish or whether He obtained them miraculously. But we do learn that He is not dependent on our poor efforts.*

Jesus had called these men into full time ministry (three and a half years ago) but here they are worried about providing for themselves and their families—so they leave the ministry and try to provide their own food—“Seek first the Kingdom of God...”

Doubtless in heaven we shall learn that while many people were saved through preaching and personal witness, many others were saved by the Lord Himself without any human help.”

The “**fire of coals**” here in John 21 is reminiscent of the fire of coals that the Roman soldiers had started to warm themselves in the courtyard of Caiphas the High Priest the morning of Jesus crucifixion. Peter had also warmed himself by that very fire as Jesus was inside being interrogated (put on trial actually) by the Sanhedrin.

This whole scene must have stirred Peter’s memory, because it was early that morning standing by a fire of coals that Peter denied the Lord 3 times (John 18:15-26).

I don’t think for a second that this was a coincidence—I believe Jesus purposely planned this meeting with Peter this way because He was going to deal with Peter’s love and commitment to Him—before restoring him both to Himself (to Jesus) and to the ministry.

John 21:9–14 (NKJV)

⁹ Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. ¹⁰ **Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.”** ¹¹ **Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken.** ¹² **Jesus said to them, “Come *and* eat breakfast.”** Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?”—knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³ **Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.** ¹⁴ **This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.**

Let me make a few observations from this text.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.’” (verse 10)

Notice that although Jesus had fish laid on a bed of coals for their breakfast there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee—He also asks them for some of the fish which *they* had caught (which He also provided).

Even though He didn’t need their help when it came to catching fish—He accepts their contribution.

When it comes to serving the Lord, He doesn't need our help—but He still directs and accepts our service for Him.

John 21:10-11 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." ¹¹ **Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken.**

Why does the Holy Spirit writing through John tell us the exact number of fish that the disciples caught?

One author had this to say—

"The Bible gives the exact number of fish in the net—one hundred and fifty-three. Many interesting explanations have been offered as to the meaning of this number: (1) The number of languages in the world at that time. (2) The number of races or tribes in the world, toward which the gospel net would be spread out. (3) The number of different kinds of fish in the sea of Galilee, or in the world. There is no doubt that it speaks of the variety of those who would be saved through the preaching of the Gospel—some from every tribe and nation.

The fishermen knew that it was remarkable that the net had not broken. This is further evidence that "God's work carried on in God's way will never lack God's resources." He will see that the net does not break."

Verse 12 is one of the most cryptic (and troubling) verses in the Bible—

John 21:12 (NKJV)

¹² **Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord.**

As we read the gospels and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus—nobody who saw the risen Lord Jesus recognized Him at first:

- *Mary didn't recognize Him at the tomb.*
- *The disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Him until He broke the bread.*
- *John 21:4 the Apostles didn't recognize Him.*
- *John 21:12 really indicates something wasn't right about His appearance—what was it?*

Why didn't those who were Jesus' closest followers recognize Him after His resurrection?

We know that after His Resurrection He still bore the marks of His crucifixion—He showed His disciples the nail prints in His hands and the spear wound in His side as they were gathered in the upper room the Sunday evening of His resurrection.

- I believe it was because He had been beaten so badly before His crucifixion (the aftermath of which He still bore on His resurrected, glorified body)—that they couldn't recognize Him.

We know that when He returned to heaven, He still bore the marks of His crucifixion—

Revelation 5:6 (NKJV)

⁶ And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain...

The first time we lay eyes on Him when we, as Christians, are Raptured and we finally see Him face to face we read—

Isaiah 53:2 (NLT)

² ...There was nothing beautiful or majestic about His appearance, nothing to attract us to Him.

Isaiah 52:14 (NLT)

¹⁴ But many were amazed when they saw Him. His face was so disfigured He seemed hardly human, and from His appearance, one would scarcely know He was a man.

In fact, Isaiah says that when we finally see Him—we will turn our face away, it will be so shocking that we won't be able to look at Him initially. Furthermore, when Jesus returns to the earth He will *still* be bearing the marks of His crucifixion—*"They will look upon Him whom they have pierced and mourn..."* (Zechariah 12:10)

You say, *"How long will He bear the marks of His crucifixion?"* I don't know—maybe forever:

Ephesians 2:7 (NKJV)

⁷ that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Let me say this, your first glimpse of Jesus is probably going to be a very shocking experience—so prepare yourself.

John 21:15a (NKJV)

¹⁵ **So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"**

What was the **'these'** that Jesus was referring to?

- He could have been pointing to the boat and the nets and asking, *"Peter do you love Me more than your chosen profession?"*
- He could have been pointing to the fish and asking, *"Do you love Me more than success and material prosperity?"*
- Jesus could have been pointing to the other disciples, reminding Peter of how he had promised, *"Though these (other disciples) deny You, I will never deny You."*

Peter had verbalized his love *for* and commitment *to* Jesus on the night before His crucifixion in the upper room. It was then that he made a promise to Him that he would be loyal to Him even if it cost him his life—he would never deny his Lord! (John 13:36-38)

Yet we all know that that was a promise he failed to make good on—that was a promise, even with the best intentions, he failed to keep.

True love (God's love) doesn't just tell people they love them with words only—they demonstrate that love by their commitment to help them, provide for them—and be there for them no matter what:

1 John 3:16–18 (NLT)

¹⁶ We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.

Please listen to me—just because Peter failed to keep his promise to the Lord by denying Him—it didn't mean that his verbal declaration of love for Jesus was a lie.

Part of the restoration process was for Jesus to teach Peter that saying you love someone and promising to be faithful to them is great (words are important)—but if it's not backed up with actions (commitment) it is really meaningless.

It's as meaningless as the wedding ring (which symbolizing the promise you made to your spouse in marriage to love them and be loyal to them)—it's as meaningless as the wedding ring on the finger of an adulterer or adulteress.

That is why I said earlier that the lessons in true love that this section of John 21 teaches can be applied to all of our close personal relationships—including and especially to our marriages.

One of the greatest heartbreaks in life—one of the greatest feelings of betrayal comes when the person we have pledged our love and loyalty to for the rest of our lives— isn't faithful to us and breaks that trust by committing adultery on us.

But even if your spouse fails to uphold the promise they made to you on your wedding day, to love you and be loyal to you until death do you part—it doesn't necessarily mean everything was a lie and they don't really love you after all.

Please understand, I'm not trying to lessen the severity of their actions or make light of their unfaithfulness—what they did was selfish, hurtful and proof that they probably love themselves (at least at that moment) more than they love you as evidenced by them cheating on you.

Look, if we were perfect people, we'd always keep our promises to each other—especially the promise we made to our spouse in marriage.

The same is true in our relationship with Jesus, our Bridegroom.

We are all a work in progress (Philippians 1:6)—and the more we draw close to Jesus every day—the more our commitment to Him and to our spouse will grow. Conversely, the more we draw close to Jesus every day—the less effective will be the enemy's temptation for us to be selfish and unfaithful in our relationship to Jesus—and in our relationship to our wife or husband in marriage.

All I can say is, when Peter was unfaithful to his Lord by denying Him—he didn't realize that that didn't *destroy* his relationship with Jesus—it was only going to wind up making it stronger—'how so?'

Through his moral failure, Peter learned a valuable lesson—and that is, that the Christian life (either toward Jesus, or our spouse) can only be lived in His strength and not in our own—a lesson that Peter had to learn the hard way.

When Peter denied Jesus after promising Him that, even though the other disciples denied Him—he (Peter) would never deny Him—I believe it broke Peter in a way few of us can understand as evidenced in that he went out and *‘wept bitterly.’* (Matt. 26:75)

For the three days that followed, I think that Peter felt he had damaged his relationship with Jesus so badly that it was beyond repair.

- *How could Jesus ever forgive him after he had failed his Lord like this—I mean ‘denying that he even knew Jesus’—that was no small sin!?*
- I believe that Peter thought his relationship with Jesus was over—*“I’m sure He wants nothing more to do with me!”*
- Yet when Jesus rose from the dead that Sunday morning—Peter was the first apostle He sought out! (1 Corinthians 15:5)

Peter was about to learn that even when we fail the Lord and deny knowing Him through our words (to friends, family, co-workers, strangers etc.)—or we deny knowing Him through our actions—even when we are unfaithful to Him—He always remains faithful in His commitment to us!

As He promised us—***“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*** (Hebrews 13:5)

Peter didn’t realize for the three days Jesus was in the grave—the three days he was broken and devastated and sobbing his heart out for breaking his promise to his precious Lord by denying Him—not once but three times! What Peter didn’t realize for those three days was that—not only was his relationship with Jesus not over—his best days for his Lord were yet a head of him! (If you doubt that all you have to do is check out the Book of Acts)

I mean, he didn’t know it at the time when he was weeping and broken for the three days Jesus was in the grave—that even though Peter had failed Jesus, Jesus would never fail him.

Yes, Peter had broken his promise to Jesus—but Jesus hadn’t broken His promise to Peter to love him no matter what, to forgive him no matter what—and to restore him no matter what! (Luke 22:31-34) The same goes for every child of God who is unfaithful to their Savior—there is forgiveness and restoration waiting for you, and like Peter—your best days in your relationship with and service for Jesus could be yet future!

Listen—the same applies for your marriage.

Look, I can only imagine the hurt, the heartbreak and the devastation adultery can bring into a marriage. I have never experienced that in my marriage—but I have counseled many who have. All I can say is the pain on their faces that reflects the brokenness of their hearts says it all.

But even though the experience is painful—the choice is simple.

Either you’re going to choose not to forgive and seek a divorce—or you’re going to choose to forgive and seek reconciliation and restoration in your marriage.

If you choose the latter—know this, all the grace and strength you need to reconcile and heal God will provide to you.

If you do choose forgiveness over unforgiveness and reconciliation over divorce you might just find that—the best years of marriage are yet future—

“For with God all things are possible!” (Matthew 19:26)

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