

**“Is Love Enough?”**  
**John 21: 9-19; Psalm 30:4-12**

He could make a grown man cry. The words gushed out surrounded by such feeling and power, even the most hard hearted fought savagely to hold back a response. He possessed a way of making you relive his moment of transformation. His was a powerful testimony of forgiveness and reconciliation.

He usually began slowly and gently. He described a normal middle class American upbringing, being taken to Sunday School and worship in a mainline Protestant denomination. He had been raised right, but somewhere he got off track. In college, he forgot the church, and upon graduation his career took precedence. Marriage and children returned him to church membership, but it was a façade hiding affairs and a life filled with alcohol and self-gratification. And then one day in the midst of a depression initiated by a realization of his personal poverty, he picked up a Bible and read the story of the Prodigal Son. For the first time in his life, he truly understood that Christ died for him, that Christ wanted to forgive him and lead him into a new life. He arose from his knees a new person, a new creation in Jesus Christ and now he wanted to proclaim that message of forgiveness and reconciliation to one and all.

The testimony took at least a half an hour, and his anecdotal narrative always moved its listeners. And one of those in attendance at this luncheon meeting was a pastor greatly impressed with the radical change faith brought to this man’s life. He wanted him to speak in his church, have his people hear how the gospel can reform us. So he immediately returned to his study and called the pastor of this man who gave such a tremendous witness.

“Jim,” he said, “I just heard John Doe speak and he did such a good job I’d like to have him here. Now, I know such a strong member of your church would be hard for you to do without, so would it disrupt anything if I had him come over on a Sunday?”

“No, I’m sure he’d be glad to come,” the man’s pastor replied.

“Well, what about the Sunday School class he teaches, any problem finding a substitute?”

“Well, he doesn’t teach Sunday School.”

“What about his duties with the youth group, or singing in the choir, or ushering or keeping the nursery?” he laughed.

“No, he’s not involved in any of those.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure you like having him around. Plus, a highly successful businessman like him must really help at stewardship time.”

“Well, actually, if he’s not giving his testimony somewhere he’s at his mountain house. And I wouldn’t say he helps that much at stewardship time.”

“Oh,” the other pastor replied.

Like this opening parable, the Apostle Peter also carried a wonderful testimony. He could describe three years of walking and talking with Jesus. He stood with bread and fish in his very hands, passing it out to five thousand people and never running out. With his own eyes he saw Lazarus walk out of his grave still wrapped like a mummy. And how he filled with pride when Jesus argued down the haughty Pharisees. None of the other eleven could rise to such levels of eloquence when relating the story of Jesus

right up to the Last Supper with Peter's own stirring words: "Even though they all fall away, I will not."

But he did, not once, but three times. And now, it is after Jesus' resurrection and we find the disciples fishing.

The Apostles have returned to Galilee. And, when Peter decides to go fishing, they all follow. In this period, fishing was best done at night. So as day breaks, Jesus is standing on the beach, although they do not recognize him. He asks them if they have caught anything, and receiving a negative answer, tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. The net becomes so filled they cannot haul it in. Then, the beloved disciple recognizes Jesus and tells Peter. Peter dives into the water to be the first to greet Him.

On the beach, Jesus is cooking fish and bread for breakfast. He tells them to add some of their fish to the preparation. Following breakfast, Jesus confronts Peter and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep."

A third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter, hurt by being questioned a third time says, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

Marj Carpenter, former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church told about a junior high Presbyterian basketball team who had just lost a close game to a Baptist church. The coach gathered his prayers around him and said, "You should be proud of what good sports you are." One young man responded, "The trouble with being a good sport is you have to lose to prove it."

Jesus was telling Peter that proving his love would not be an easy task.

Now, this passage is often called the restoration or rehabilitation of Peter; since Jesus' three questions recall Peter's three denials. But as an interlude, I want to mention a couple of interpretation problems with the passage. Usually, sermons don't deal with these topics. Only if you are in a serious Bible study will they be discussed. But, biblical interpretation is dispensed with such glibness these days; statements such as "I just believe the Bible," it is important to recognize it is not that simple.

First, remember the Bible was written in Greek. Jesus spoke Aramaic. So, all our translations go from Aramaic to Greek to English. Most of you have had a taste of some foreign language, so you recognize the difficulty of translating exact meaning and intent from one language to another. It is exactly the same with the Bible.

Second, if you read John 20:30-31, you will note it was obviously written as an ending to the gospel. Yet, this passage follows. And, our oldest manuscripts all contain this chapter. Although there are a number of textual considerations, such as the use of words, that lead most scholars to believe our passage was a later addition, likely not written by John. But no one knows for certain.

Third, when Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me more than these?” was he referring to: (a) the other disciples? Otherwise, “Peter, do you love me more than the other disciples love me?” Or, (b) was Jesus referring to the occupation of fishing, Peter’s work? Pointing to the boat, net, and other fishing paraphernalia was Jesus asking Peter “Do you love me more than these?” Both interpretations are possible; we just don’t know.

Fourth, the passage uses two different Greek words for love, *phileo* and *agape*. When I was in seminary, much was made of Jesus’ switching between the two because it was believed they each gave a different sense of the kind of love intended. Today, most biblical scholars think the terms are used synonymously with no differing shades of meaning. And who knows what word or words Jesus actually employed in his native Aramaic. And these are just some of the questions the passage raises.

Now, I realize this is not the most exciting material. But it is so important to understand that biblical interpretation is not a cut and dried science. There is so much we do not know. We believe God’s word comes to us through the scriptures. But our lack of knowledge should always add a healthy dose of humility to our interpretations.

A little four year old girl was learning to say the Lord’s Prayer. She decided to recite it all by herself without her mother. She said, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Each generation reinterprets the scriptures through its own eyes. That is the glory of the gospel, and its challenge.

As I noted earlier, this passage is often referred to as the restoration or rehabilitation of Peter. For 2000 years Peter has been one of the Bible’s favorite characters. Why? Because he was such a screw up. Most of us who attempt to live a life of faith relate to his antics. Peter was good hearted, but typically acted before he thought. He always wanted to be the first in line, strived to be in the center of the action, readily stepped forward, chest stuck out, confidently expressing his loyalty and expertise. He was afraid of nothing. No one could separate him from Jesus. But then, when confronted with danger, with overwhelming odds, with having to make a split second decision about his loyalty to Jesus, he flinched, blinked, took the safer path, and said, “Jesus who?” And what was worse was that he denied Jesus not once, or twice, but three times.

How we understand Peter. When confronted with a request to teach Sunday School, or whether to go ahead and take that dubious deduction on our income tax, or when choosing between church or our warm bed, or when revenge is right within our grasp, or when confronted with our pledge card, we understand Peter’s dilemma. And that is the glory of the passage. We believe the gospel writer John who so loved symbolism and contrasts uses Jesus’ three questions as a reminder of Peter’s three denials. By doing so he emphasizes the magnitude of treachery in Peter’s act. And yet, Jesus forgives him. The passage pointedly says to us, “If Jesus can forgive Peter, He will surely forgive you.” The story is an illustration of love and grace to each one of us, declaring that no one is beyond the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

But it is also a call for imitation. Forgiveness is the mark of a Christian. If we cannot forgive others as Jesus forgave Peter, then we are not Christian. It worries me how little forgiveness I find among Christians. We talk about it, preach about it, affirm it Sunday after Sunday. We call on it constantly, and yet are so unwilling to extend it to

one another. Jesus was real plain about this. His followers would forgive others because He forgives us.

My father once told me a story about when he worked at an oil refinery. A new man we will call “Bill” came to work. As often happens with a new man, some of the other men played a trick on him by telling him he had to carry five one gallon cans of gasoline to the pump house to have it tested. Well, in actuality, you only had to carry one quart. My father had nothing to do with this joke, but the perpetrators told the new man it was my father who organized it. For the thirty odd years Bill and my father worked together, Bill was always cool to my dad, would speak to him, but that was all.

One day after both of them retired, my dad and another co-worker stopped by to see Bill. My father decided to ask Bill why he was so cool to him all those years. “Well, Lud,” he said, “I just couldn’t get over that joke you played on me that first day.” My dad explained to him he didn’t do it. But I thought even if he had, there was thirty years of lost friendship, of avoiding one another, of uncomfortableness because a man couldn’t let go, couldn’t forgive, a joke.

Sadly, this is no an unusual situation. But the Christian forgives, moves on, feels the same about others as Christ feels about him.

Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Those who are forgiven will respond with forgiveness and service. Love always shows itself in actions. The forgiveness and transformation brought about by faith in Christ flows into service to Him. One does not have to be forced to move in this direction. For the truly transformed, it is a natural progression from faith to works. Our gratitude for God’s blessings finds expression in what we do for God and others. Jesus’ command to feed his sheep moves us in numerous avenues. That sentence could translate into: Teach my young, support my missionaries, be youth advisors, take care of your aging parents, work in the nursery, give of yourself so the gospel may be proclaimed.

Throughout Christian history, we have struggled with this part of the faith. We love forgiveness. We grasp on to it, claim it, accept it, cling to it. But doing something with it is a much more difficult, and continuous step. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German theologian, coined the term “cheap grace” to signify our willingness to readily accept God’s love and forgiveness, followed by our attempts to respond to it as meagerly as possible.

But notice that Jesus selects Peter, impetuous, unworthy Peter, to lead his people. And note, he uses the terminology of sheep herding when describing our Christian duty. A shepherd was the lowest of jobs. No mother wanted her son to grow up to be a shepherd. It was dirty, smelly, low paying work. You only did it when you couldn’t find anything else to do. Yet, Jesus says to Peter and us, “Feed my sheep.” We are not perfect, nor are our methods, and what Christ calls us to do is often dirty, smelly, thankless work, but God uses the weak elements of the world, people like Peter, and you and me, to bring about His will.

The story is told that when Mahatma Gandhi boarded a train one day, a sandal slipped off his foot and landed beneath the train. The distinguished Indian leader did not have time to retrieve it. Quickly Gandhi removed his remaining sandal and threw it back

down the track in the direction of the other sandal. When asked for an explanation, Gandhi replied, “The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use.”

When we say we love Jesus are you and I more worried about preserving the shoes we have, or trying to think how others can benefit from our blessings?

“Is Love Enough?”

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter realized an affirmative answer not only brought love and forgiveness, but committed him to a life of service and forgiveness of others.

This morning, Jesus asks us the same question. “Do you love me?” As you and I look at our lives, how are we answering Jesus?

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