

THE RISEN JESUS HEALS PETER'S GUILT AND SHAME

JOHN 21:15-17

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON MARCH 23, 2008

Peter had a leaky valve in his heart that needed some surgery by the Great Physician. Just a few days earlier, Peter denied the Lord three times. He even took a formal oath before witnesses bringing curses down on his life if he knew Jesus (Mk.14:71). A few days later and crushed by his failure, Peter couldn't imagine himself claiming to be any kind of leader among Jesus' disciples. He just felt too guilty. So, along with the other disciples, he went back to Galilee to do what he knew best, fishing. However, that didn't work out so well either. They fished all night but couldn't scare up a minnow. Not only did he let the Lord down, he even fails at what he does best. Peter just couldn't make anything work right.

But, beloved, things changed. The next morning the risen Jesus shows up on the beach about a hundred yards away. At first, they don't recognize Him. He yells out to them, "How's the fishing?" They say, "Not so good." *"Try lowering your nets on the right side of the boat."* And when they did they caught so many fish they couldn't haul the net in the boat. Then Jesus called them to come in for breakfast. John tells Peter, "Peter, it's the Lord!" In a flash, Peter put on his shirt, dove in, and began to swim like a dolphin to Jesus. *Oh Peter, how we love you. You show us the grace of God like no one else.*

But, clearly, Peter wasn't yet ready to lead others in the spread of the gospel. There were just too many pieces missing. He didn't yet know the depth of Jesus' love and commitment to him. He didn't know the grip Jesus had on his life no matter how much he had failed Him. Peter didn't yet know how much joy and delight Jesus took in him. Most importantly, Peter didn't yet know the finality, the irrevocable, and imperishable forgiveness of the Lord. Until he learns that he is safe in Jesus' love and what Jesus finished for him on the cross, Peter won't have anything to say to others about Jesus. There won't be any good news in his own heart for him to share.

Peter has a leaky valve in his heart. But Jesus won't let Peter stay in this condition for long. In verses 15-17 Peter's on the operating table with Jesus attending to His patient. Here's what I want to do this morning. I want us to look at three stages of the operation. 1. The Diagnosis 2. The Surgery 3. The Outcome

THE DIAGNOSIS

Where did Peter get off track? Well, it started on the night that Jesus was arrested. In the upper room Jesus told Peter that he was going to deny him. But Peter challenged the Lord, In Mtt.26:23

"No Lord, you're wrong." He says, "Not me. Even though all of these (the other disciples) fall away I will never fall away." And Jesus said to Peter, *"Peter, this very night before the cock crows you will deny Me three times".*

From hindsight, it's easy for us to see the problem. Peter should have said, *"Lord, if you say I'm going to fall away, as much as I can't imagine it, it must be true. Please help me with this. Make me strong. Change my character. Give me the courage to love you as I should."*

Instead, Peter says, *"No, Lord. That may be true about the others but not so with me."* And then he added, *"Even if I have to die with you, I WILL NEVER DENY YOU!"* In John 13:37, Peter said, *"I (not we) will lay down my life for you."* Peter thought the rock upon which Jesus would build His church was the rock of his own superior courage and strength. He would come to realize that the rock is not himself at all, instead it's the reality that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

PETER'S COLLAPSE OF COURAGE

Now, before we see the Lord make his first incision, let me ask, "Where were the other disciples that night when Peter denied the Lord?" They ran for the hills in fear! All but Peter and John ran away as fast as they could. So, before we get too hard on Peter, just remember that it would have been less loving to have joined the other and run away. Peter's love, imperfect and partial as it was, compelled him to follow Jesus after His arrest and to risk his life for his friend. Yes, Peter blew it big time. But he did so while loving him.

THE DENIALS:

After they arrested Jesus, Peter stood in the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus was being tried. Warming his hands in front of a charcoal fire, one of the high priest's servant girls recognized Peter. She said, *"You were with the Nazarene."* Peter said, *"I don't know what you are talking about."* Then, Peter went out to the gate. The servant girl followed him and said a second time, *"This man is one of Jesus' disciples!"* And for the second time, Peter denied it. A little later some others said, *"Certainly you are one of His disciples."* Hearing that, Peter began to curse himself and he swore to them, *"I do not know this man you are talking about."* And just at that moment the cock crowed and Peter remembered the words of Jesus. He looked up and saw Jesus being led out. He was right in front of Peter, and He looked at Peter. Their eyes met, their hearts met, and Peter ran out weeping bitterly broken with guilt (Mk.14:62-72). The last denial was the worst, because Peter made a maledictory oath putting himself under the curse of God if he was lying. To curse himself meant, *"I'll be damned if I'm not telling the truth."* Like Jephtha, (Ju.21:30-40), Peter made a rash and foolish vow. You can't dig your grave much deeper than this. And he was crushed under the weight of his guilt. He wept and ran away. In Peter's mind that would be the last encounter he would have with Jesus on this earth. Jesus is dead and his last words about Him were lies to save his own skin.

In Robert Bolt's, *A Man For All Seasons*, the daughter of Thomas Moore pleads with her dad to recant of his word so that he wouldn't be burned at the stake. Moore challenged Henry the VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn. Now, he's being executed for that challenge. But she pleads with him and tells him that his word is not worth dying for. Thomas Moore says to his daughter, *"Meg, when you make a promise you are putting your life in your hands like water. If you break your promise it's like opening your hands and letting the water out. You not only lose the promise you also lose yourself."*

Peter made all of these great claims and promises and vows he couldn't keep. He hung the heavy weight of his faith on the thin wire of his pride. He was certain that his love and courage were stronger than that of the others. Yet, at the critical moment when his claim was put to the test, he failed so badly and so completely.

He opened his hands, and the water of his promise and of himself ran out onto the ground of that courtyard. And beloved, there wasn't a thing he could do to ever get it back. Have you ever said words and wished the moment you said them that you could grab them out of the air and stuff them back down? When it really counted he lied to save himself.

There was no consolation. There was nothing anyone could say to him that would make this right. Do you think words like, "To err is human." "Everyone make mistakes." or "Think positive thoughts." would heal that gapping hole in his heart? He's never going to be able to take those words back and he knows it. Has anything like this ever happened to you? If Peter doesn't find the grace of God, through Jesus Christ, he will never recover. Every excuse, every explanation will fall short. Everything he has built his life and personal identity on, the structure of his being went up in flames. He now knows that he's not any better than anyone else. And, beloved, he's now one step closer to laying hold of the gospel. But he needs a good heart surgeon. Jesus is the only one who can heal that wound. OK. That's the diagnosis. Let's look at the surgery.

THE SURGERY

There is a violent grace about this.¹ Before Peter can recover he must first face the music. Before he can discover the *sufficiency* of Jesus he must recognize *how insufficient* his foundation for life was. Peter didn't listen to what Jesus said about his weaknesses. Jesus warned him that his love was not as strong as he thought it was. But Peter insisted, "Others may fail you, but not me." So in verse 15 when the resurrected Jesus asked Peter, "Do you truly love me *more than these*," it was like a knife in a wound. Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love You."

But Peter's answer differs from the Lord's question in two respects:

¹ After the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Robert Kennedy quoted Aeschylus (6c. BC),

"Even in our sleep, pain which can't forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

In Psalm 38:2 David wrote, "Thine arrows have sunk deep into me." (Ps.38:2)

First, **Peter leaves off the comparison**, “*more than these.*” Humbled by all this, he now knows that he’s not any better than the other disciples. As painful as that was, it was critical for Peter. If he was ever to lay hold of the gospel, he must lay aside any idea of competing with his brothers for the honor of being worthy of it. The Bible says, “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” God doesn’t call you because you are more worthy than someone else. If the Lord should mark our iniquities none of us could stand before Him. It’s *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us. It is by grace that you have been saved and not of works lest any man boast*, and that includes Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul, you and me. This loving relationship we get to enjoy with God is a miracle of grace. We can’t compete with each other for it. To lay hold of the Lord’s forgiveness is to humble yourself and admit that you aren’t worthy of His grace.

Second, When Jesus asked, “Do you love me?” **He used the Greek word “agape”** for the English word “love.” Agape, more than any other word, is about selfless commitment.² Jesus was asking Peter, “*Do you love me with selfless commitment?*” Peter had just denied the Lord to protect himself. He can’t bring himself to use the word Jesus has used. Peter says, “*Yes Lord, You know that I love you.*” But he doesn’t use *agape*. He uses the word *phileo*. “*I love you but, I can’t say that I love you with agape love or selfless commitment*”. *Phileo* doesn’t communicate the depth and self-sacrifice of agape love. He wants Jesus to know that he loves Him but he can’t bring himself to use that word for love that Jesus used.

Like Nathan before David, Jesus is bringing Peter to a place of accountability for his great claim. He is exposing his wound. Have you ever felt this? At times it’s really hard for me to say to God. “I love you.” The moment I do, every hypocritical and sinful thing I’ve done flashes before me and shoots that claim full of holes. But that is just what the Lord wants us to consider!

The first step in healing of guilt is to own up to our sin. You’ll never know the beauty of the Lord’s grace until you stop blaming others, circumstances and making excuses.

“I know I have a bad temper, but that was the way I was raised.”

“*I know I am critical, but God gave me the gift of discernment.*”

“*I know I am lustful, but God made me with a powerful sex drive.*”

“*Yes my ethical standards are low, but everybody does it.*”

“*I know I’m not disciplined and lazy but that’s just the way I am. At least I’m being authentic.*”

Look, until you’re ready to take responsibility for your actions and own up to them you will never be free. David said,

² D.A. Carson argues that too much is made of the distinction between *agape* and *phileo*. In his commentary on John he makes a good case for the similarities of these two Greek words. He argues that Jesus reasons are stylistic and not a contrast in meaning. Although he is correct to say that these words aren’t always contrasted, they may be. The context of Peter’s struggle seems to be illuminated by the potential contrast. So, I have maintained that contrast here.

"When I kept silent about my sin my body wasted away for day and night thy hand was heavy upon me. My vitality was drained. Selah. Then I acknowledged my sin to Thee and my iniquity I did not hide. I said, 'I confessed my transgressions to the Lord and He forgave me the guilt of my sin...' Be glad in the Lord and rejoice and shout for joy," (Ps.32:3ff).

Peter now knows that he can't say that he loves the Lord with that great selfless love. But what would he say in the presence of the others? He chose the lesser love to describe his heart. And even though Peter can't say that He loves Jesus with *agape* love, Jesus shocks them all and says, *"Feed My lambs. OK Peter, we've established that you blew it and that you have more to learn about how to love Me...but right now I want you to hear my purpose for you. Go and do the job I have called you to do. Feed my sheep. My grace is sufficient."* But there is more work to be done.

A Second Time: In verse 16 Jesus asked Peter a second time, *"Peter do you love (agape) Me?"* Let me paraphrase, *"OK. Peter, by dropping the reference comparing yourself with these other men you have indicated that you no longer believe that you are better than your brothers, and that your love for Me is superior to theirs. But now, dropping all comparisons let me ask you again, "DO YOU LOVE (agape) ME? If I ask you a second time in front of these men what will you do? Will you rush to overstate and over estimate your love in front of them or will you think and give an honest response?"* Oh, how tempting it must have been for Peter to have made himself look good in front of them by claiming, *"Yes, I love you with agape love."* But he didn't.

Peter resists the temptation to say what he knows not to be the case. He has blown it big time by lying and this time he will choose to lose face before he lies again: *"Lord you know that I love (phileo) you. But I can't say that I love You the way you're asking."* Again, Jesus says, *"OK, shepherd My sheep."*

JESUS GOES TO THE ROOT CAUSE

Notice that Jesus doesn't address Peter's specific behavior. He didn't talk about Peter's dishonesty, his rash vow, denial, or cowardice. He doesn't say, *"Now Peter, are you ever going to be dishonest again? Are you ever going to chicken out again?"* Here's why. The real question is not initially behavioral. One of the amazing things about Christianity is that faith and sin are motivational before they are behavioral. Sin is an inward dynamic of the heart before it is an outward act of behavior. Christianity is not mere moralism. It's not first about conforming to a higher moral standard, although there are many rules and standards to be kept. At the heart of the Christian faith, sin and faith are the issues of what we *love* the most. At its root, all sin exposes what we really love. Now, that's humbling but true. When we sin we're saying, at least for the moment, that we love what that sin has to offer more than what God is for us. Any time we sin we push the Lord away from the center of our hearts out onto the margin of our lives and replace Him with something we love more at the moment.

A KEY TO FORGIVENESS

I recently read about a boss that ruined the career of an employee. The embittered worker went to a Christian counselor about her resentment toward her former boss. The counselor said, "Forgive your boss." Every time they met he said the same thing. "You must forgive your boss!" Now of course to forgive is good advice. However her resolutions to forgive didn't resolve her bitterness.

One day it occurred to her why she was so angry. Her boss had taken away the most important thing in her life: her job and her career. And she was angry about that and justly so. But she began to see that she had made her career the most important thing in her life. Instead of letting God name her, she was letting her career name her. Her entire sense of value and worth was hanging on the thin wire of her success. She realized that she loved what she thought her job could give her more than what God had given her in Jesus Christ. When she owned up to that and asked the Lord and His love for her to be the greatest love and foundation of her life, she found a brand new capacity to forgive her boss. And she did.

Jesus is pushing Peter to examine what he really loves. And like all of us, to some degree his heart was divided. Jesus forced Peter to think about what he prized, cherished, valued, treasured and honored the most. And if you really do love Jesus, you will come to love what He has done for you. You will receive what He has done for you. You will prize and cherish Him and His love for you above everything else.

Notice that Peter's ministry is not conditioned on his acknowledging that he loves Jesus with *agape* love. He never does so here. And yet, Jesus restores him and ordains Peter, "*Peter, Shepherd My sheep.*"

For the third time, Jesus says, "*Peter, do you love (phileo) Me?*" This time Jesus uses the lesser word for love that Peter has been using all along. And this grieved Peter because it called into question even the lesser love he has been claiming. I love his response. Peter says, "*Lord you know all things; And, Lord you know the exact degree of love I have for you. You know that I blew it. You know that I denied you to save my skin. You know that I made a foolish vow. You know that disowned you. You know the oath I took that brought your curse on my life. You know my guilt and shame. You know everything. You have searched me and known me when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thoughts from afar. You are intimately acquainted with all my ways even before there is a word on my tongue. Behold, O Lord, You know it all. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me It is too high I cannot attain it. But, Lord, I know there is a love you have born in my heart for you and as imperfect and flawed and partial as it is, it is there and I know you know that too.*"

Jesus said, "*Peter, Feed my dear sheep.*"

A SHIFT IN FOUNDATIONS

What has Jesus done with Peter?" He has made Peter shift his confidence in himself to the omniscient love Jesus has for him. The risen Jesus knows everything there is to know about him, loved him anyway and called him to serve Him in his kingdom. Before this day the foundation of Peter's life was his confidence that he was more loyal, more courageous, more righteous, more loving of Jesus than any of the other disciples. Peter believed that what qualified him for leadership among the disciples was the fact that he was a better man of

greater love and integrity. Before Peter could ever be at peace and lead among these men, in the service of the gospel, he would have to let go of that nonsense. He would have to be humbled and then receive the love of the One who would love him as no one ever could or would.

Beloved, becoming a Christian is transferring your confidence from yourself to Jesus and to the love that will never let you go. Our hearts ache for such love. You know they do. They ache to be loved unconditionally with an irrevocable, imperishable, and unassailable love.

All of us have failed to love the Lord as we should. All of us have sin in our past and *present* that would disqualify us to deserve the Lord's love. And like Peter all of us must let go of our hope in our own righteousness and instead grab hold of the righteous record of Jesus that is offered to us by His grace. By His death and resurrection He offers to take the record of our sin on Himself and give us the record of His righteousness as a gift. No one will ever offer you such love. And that love and grace makes you want to love Him more.

FINALLY: THE OUTCOME

Peter was healed and became a faithful apostle. Guess who wrote, *"Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within you?"* (1Pet. 3:15) It was Peter, who at the critical moment in his life was not ready to give an answer. Only by God's mercy could he say this. By God's grace and mercy he learned to rest in God's grace.

Peter denied the Lord three agonizing times beside a charcoal fire. And three times beside a charcoal fire, Jesus reinstated Peter to a place of ministry in His kingdom. He offered one affirmation for each denial. And three times Peter humbled himself and restrained his claim of love in front of the other disciples. Oh what grace! Peter, who lied, calling down God's curse on his life and deserving God's judgment received God's mercy and grace. In one way or another, we all deserve His judgment. David says, *"Who can say that he has kept his heart pure?"* (Pv.20:9)

I once read a story of a young Brazilian girl who grew up in abject poverty in a small village near the big city of Sao Paulo. As a teenager it became obvious to her that she could escape her poverty by going to the big city and becoming a prostitute. So, she ran away from home to begin her new career. When her mother discovered her plans she gathered up all the money she could, went to the local drug store and had her picture taken in one of those photo booths that take three black and white pictures for a quarter. Stuffing more than a dozen of those picture strips in her purse she bought a bus ticket and rode to the city. After a little research, she entered the lobbies of every hotel she could find and tacked one small black and white picture of herself on their bulleting boards. On the back she wrote this note, "No matter what you have done or what you have become, Come home. I love you."

The resurrected Jesus seeks us out and says something similar to us, *"I have taken the curse you deserve and the justice you deserve on Myself. Believe in Me and be at peace. And then...get back to what I have called you to do."*

So, turn to the risen Lord Jesus today. Turn to the beauty of His grace and forgiveness. Turn to the sweetness of His irrevocable and unassailable forgiveness. And listen to Peter who said,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His *great mercy* has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the *resurrection of Jesus Christ* from the dead to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, In this you greatly rejoice.” (1Pe.1:3-4). Amen.