

That's a Good Question – 31
John 21:15-17
“A Restoration Conversation”

1. Earlier this month, on February 5th, President Obama participated in the National Prayer Breakfast held at the Washington Hilton. The National Prayer Breakfast dates back to 1953, and has been attended by every president since Eisenhower.
2. At this year's Prayer Breakfast, the program included a keynote address from former British prime minister, Tony Blair, and a concert by Christian group *Casting Crowns*.
3. In the postscript to John's gospel, the 21st chapter, we read about another historic breakfast. This breakfast didn't have any politicians, but I am certain that it was of more spiritual significance than one held in Washington a few weeks ago.
4. After the disciples had caught a miraculous haul of fish, they came to the shoreline where Jesus had been standing, and John tells us in verse 9, “As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread.”
5. In verse 12, it says, “Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine...” The resurrected Jesus had cooked breakfast for his weary disciples, and He shared what must have been a very special meal with them.
6. While the breakfast was no doubt memorable, what took place after the breakfast was especially significant for one the most beloved of all the disciples – Simon Peter.
7. In this chapter John records for us a very important conversation that took place between Jesus and the fiery follower who had shamefully denied his Lord not too many days prior to this meeting. In that conversation, three times we find our Lord asking, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” That is a good question.
8. Jesus and Peter had seen one another since the resurrection, but this conversation marked a restoration in their relationship, and in the ministry of Peter.
9. If you've ever failed the Lord - if you've ever blown it in your Christian life, then there is encouragement and hope for you in this restoration conversation. As we study this exchange between Jesus and Peter, we find three important truths. Notice them with me. First of all, we see:

I. WHAT JESUS REQUIRES FROM US

1. Jesus opens the conversation with a question. In verse 15, we read, "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" If you think of all that had happened in Peter's life, especially his denial, this is not the first question you might have expected Jesus to ask.

2. Perhaps we expect Him to say, "Peter, claimest thou me?" Or, maybe He would ask, "Peter, are you sorry?" Maybe we expect to hear Him ask, "Simon Peter, are you ready make up for your mistake?"

3. None of these, however, are His question. Jesus asked Peter, "Lovest thou me?" The fact that Jesus asked this particular question speaks volumes to us today.

4. What does Jesus require and expect from you? Some would say good works, others would say church attendance, and still other might say that Jesus just expects us to try our best to be like Him.

5. All of those answers may sound good, but they are not the first and foremost thing that Jesus requires from you. More than anything else, Jesus wants your love.

6. Notice a couple of things about this love that Jesus requires from us. Notice first of all, that He wants from us:

A. A preeminent love

1. Look again at the question Jesus poses to Peter in verse 15. He asks, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" Notice that phrase "more than these".

2. It is not exactly clear what Jesus was referring to when He said "these". Perhaps he motioned toward the fishing boat and nets, and said, "Do you love me more than your old trade and business?"

3. Perhaps he pointed to the other disciples, and said, "Do you love me more than these men do," or "Do you love me more than you love these men, your friends?"

4. The truth is, we do not know exactly what Jesus was referring to when He said, "more than these," but what we do know is that Jesus wanted to be loved above everything else in Peter's life.

5. Jesus did not want to hold just a part of Peter's love. He wanted to have the preeminence in Peter's love. He wanted to be loved by Peter more than Peter loved anything or anyone else.

6. This should not surprise us. Jesus himself said that the greatest commandment was this: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind (Matthew 22:37)."

7. Unfortunately, too often Jesus is forced to compete for our love with a multitude of things that are not nearly as worthy of our love as He is. We love our jobs, our possessions, our television time, our recreation, and our money, and we often give Jesus only the little love that's left over.

8. He is the Friend that sticks closer than a brother, and yet we often treat him like a distant relative we only rarely see. We tell Him we love Him because that is what you are supposed to do, but our love is so often shallow and superficial.

9. He requires from us a preeminent love. Notice something else about the love He expects from us. He requires also:

B. A practical love

1. We will look more closely at Peter's response to the question of his love in just a moment, but suffice it to say that each time he is questioned, Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

2. After each of those responses, notice what Jesus says. In verse 15, Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Then in verses 16 and 17 He says, "Feed my sheep."

3. Jesus says, "Do you love Me, Simon?" Peter answers, "Yes." Jesus says, "Then do something about that love."

4. A declaration of love will never replace the demonstration of love. It always means much more when a person not only says that they love you, but they show that love to you as well.

5. Jesus expects your love. And you need to realize that He is not satisfied simply with your profession of love for Him. He wants to see your love for Him put into practice.

6. The ancient writer, Thomas Kempis once said, "Whoever loves much, does much." Jesus expects us to affirm our love to Him by acting upon it.

7. In 1994, a young boy was accidentally dropped from a high-rise housing project in Chicago. After the little boy's death, a counselor was working with his younger brother who said that when his brother was dropped he immediately ran as fast as he could down the stairs. When the counselor asked him why, the little boy said that he had hoped to catch his brother before he hit the ground. It was an impossible feat, but it was a beautiful expression of genuine love.¹

8. In these weak, human bodies, we may never be able to serve the Lord Jesus the way we want to, and we may not accomplish all that we try for Him, but if we truly love Him, we will try!

9. He requires from us a preeminent love that produces practical and passionate service. Notice a second truth we draw from this restoration conversation. Notice not only *what Jesus requires from us*, but notice also secondly:

II. WHAT JESUS RECOGNIZES ABOUT US

1. In our text, three times, we find the Lord asking Peter the question, “Lovest thou me?” Three times we find Peter saying, “Thou knowest that I love thee.”

2. Some might wonder, “Why would Jesus keep pushing Peter?” The reality is that as you examine this conversation more closely, you find that Jesus was drawing a confession from Peter.

3. The Lord knew Peter even better than Peter knew himself, and in this conversation, He revealed what He recognized about the depths of Peter’s heart.

4. Do you realize that nobody knows you quite like Jesus does? He sees the hidden recesses of your heart and mind, where the truth about who you really are is found.

5. That can be a fearful fact for some, but it can also be a great encouragement. Notice a couple of things that Jesus recognizes about us. First of all, He recognizes:

A. Our flaws

1. In our Bibles, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” And Peter says, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” However, if you were to read this passage in the original language, you would see a subtle difference in the words that Jesus and Peter used for love.

2. Jesus asks, “Simon, do you *agapao* me?” Peter answers, “Lord, you know that I *phileo* you.” *Agapeo*, the word that Jesus uses, describes a sacrificial, selfless, devoted love. *Phileo*, the word that Peter uses, is a similar word, but it speaks more of a deep affection, or fondness toward something or someone. It is a lesser love than *agapao*.

3. Twice, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me with a selfless, sacrificial, ultimate type of love?” Both times, Peter has to confess, “Lord, you know that I love you with a fond, brotherly sort of love.”

4. The third time that Jesus asks the question, He switches and uses Peter's word. He asks, "Simon, do you *phileo* me." Look at Peter's reaction to this change in the wording. Verse 17 says, "Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?"

5. Do you see what was happening here? Jesus was letting Peter know that He recognized that Peter's love for Him was not yet what it should be. He was saying to Peter, "I know you're love and devotion to me are somewhat flawed right now."

6. Today, as you sit here in church, nobody around you may truly know how messed up you are, but you can rest assured that Jesus does. He sees right through all of your facades and charades. He recognizes your flaws.

7. Next time you go the airport, beware of their new security technology. The TSA is trying a new type of security scanning that will likely replace existing metal detectors. The new technology takes a full body scan of passengers, and displays an image of everything (and I mean everything) under their clothes. One article described the new "body scanning machine" as being "a little too personal."ⁱⁱⁱ

8. Without technology, the Lord sees and recognizes you on a level more personal than you could ever imagine. He knew the flaws of Peter's love, and He knows the flaws of your life.

9. Notice not only that Jesus recognizes our flaws, but notice also further that He recognizes:

B. Our faith

1. There is no doubt that Jesus picked up on the subtle difference in the love that Peter confessed. However, there is something else about Peter's statement that I am certain was not lost on the Lord.

2. Three times Peter says, "Thou knowest..." In verse 17, Peter says, "Lord, thou knowest all things..." Peter may not have loved Jesus to the degree that he should, but He believed in Him with all of his heart.

3. Peter wasn't perfect; but He wasn't a pagan either. He was flawed, but He had a deep faith in Christ. He was a work in progress, and some work had already been done.

4. Take heart, dear Christian, Christ knows that you are still deeply flawed, and that you have not arrived, but He also knows that you are making progress, and that in spite of your flaws, you have faith in Him.

5. In 1464, an artist named Agostino was commissioned to create a sculpture of the Old Testament hero, David. The artist only got as far as roughly carving the feet and the lower parts of the legs. For some reason, Agostino left the project, and the huge block of marble was left untouched for twenty-five years, as time and the elements wore away at it.

6. In 1500, the inventory of a marble workshop reported “a certain figure of marble called David, badly blocked out and [warped].” The owners of the neglected marble knew that it was too valuable to let waste away, and so they commissioned a young, 26 year-old artist named Michelangelo to finish the sculpture of David. After two years, Michelangelo had created his masterpiece.ⁱⁱⁱ

7. Our lives may not look like much right now. We may appear like a neglected piece of marble, but don't forget that the Master is not through with us yet!

8. Jesus is still working on us, and one day, we are going to be perfect! We are flawed, but we believe that our Lord knows all things, and that He is continuing to make us into what He wants us to be.

9. Notice one more truth that we draw from this restoration conversation. Notice not only *what Jesus requires from us*, and *what Jesus recognizes about us*, but notice also thirdly:

III. WHAT JESUS REPEATS TO US

1. One of the things that is so unique about this conversation is the repetition. Jesus repeats His question three times, and Peter responds three times.

2. While Peter repeatedly confesses his limited love, the Lord repeatedly speaks instruction and direction to Peter.

3. This was not an easy conversation for Peter. He had once boasted his total allegiance and loyalty to the Lord, only to deny Him later. Now, he humbly and brokenly confesses that his love is not all that it should be.

4. While this conversation was no doubt hard for Peter, when we read our Lord's repeated responses, we find that it was helpful for Peter as well.

5. As we walk with the Lord, there are certain things that He constantly reaffirms to us, and repeats to us. We find those in this conversation to Peter. Notice first of all that Jesus repeats to us:

A. His commitment

1. Peter had failed the Lord miserably. Intimidated and fearful, Peter had cursed and swore that he never even knew Jesus.

2. While Peter had forsaken the Lord, we find in our text that the Lord had not in turn forsaken him. Peter says, "You know that I love you." In verse 17, we read, "Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep."

3. Think about that! Peter had blown it, and yet here is the Lord entrusting him with the care of His people. Though Peter had failed, Jesus was still committed to using Peter for His glory.

4. No matter how bad you have blown it; no matter the depth of your failure and the sharpness of your shame, Jesus Christ is ready to forgive you and restore you because He is eternally committed to you!

5. I read recently about a mother whose teenage daughter was breaking her heart through her rebellion and sin. The trouble reached a peak when the girl was arrested for drunk driving. After bailing her out of jail, the mother and daughter did not speak until the next day.

6. When they sat down at the table the next morning, the mother handed her daughter a small wrapped gift. The girl opened the gift and then rolled her eyes when she saw what was inside the package. Inside was a small rock with a note attached to it. The teen snipped, "What is this for?" The mother said, "Read the note."

7. The young girl began to read, and tears welled up in her eyes, and then started to roll down her cheeks. The note said, "This rock is thousands and thousands of years old. That's how long it will take before I give up on you."

8. As long as time stretches into the endless ages of eternity, we can rest assured that our Lord will never, never give up on us! Through His Word and by His Spirit He repeats to us His commitment!

9. Notice not only that Jesus repeats to us His commitment, but notice also that He repeats to us:

B. His call

1. Notice the three instructions that our Lord gives to Peter in this text. In verse 15, He said, "Feed my lambs." In verse 16, He said, "Feed my sheep." The word translated "feed" there is a different word than the one found in verse 16. It means to shepherd.

2. In verse 17, He says, "Feed my sheep", going back to the word he used in verse 15, but this time with reference to the sheep rather than lambs.

3. Jesus was saying to Peter, "I have a work for you to do with those who are going to follow me. I need you to feed the little one, shepherd all my flock, and feed them as they grow."

4. In the book of Acts, we watch as Peter takes this shepherd role in the early church, and leads them on behalf of their Lord.

5. Early on, when Peter was just a rough, callous fisherman, Jesus had called Him away from the boats, and into a life of discipleship. In John 21, though a lot had happened in Peter's life, one thing remained the same, Jesus was still calling Him!

6. As long as you live, the Lord Jesus is going to repeat in your heart His call upon your life. You will feel Him tugging you time and time again! He wants you to follow Him. He wants you to serve Him! He will keep calling!

7. Several years ago, our government actually did something good for a change. They established the National Do Not Call Registry. The Do Not Call Registry allowed Americans to put their phone number on a list that would prohibit telemarketers from calling them and trying to sell them everything from long-distance to vitamins.

8. The Lord Jesus is not a telemarketer; He is a Sovereign Lord! You cannot keep Him from calling you! You may try to ignore His voice, but if you truly belong to Him, He will continue to call you until He calls you home!

1. With all the scandals surrounding professional athletes today, the story of Texas Ranger, Josh Hamilton is uniquely refreshing. In the 2008 Home Run Derby, Hamilton hit a record 28 home runs in the first round.

2. I watched the young slugger hit, and I heard the announcers talking about the remarkable story of his life. While Hamilton was once a young baseball prodigy, he nearly lost everything to drug and alcohol addiction.

3. A former first round draft pick, Hamilton burned through millions of dollars and ended up a junkie. To make a long story short, while Hamilton was at his lowest, someone shared with him the gospel, and he gave his life to Christ. Now, he is an all-star, and one of baseball few good stories.

4. I think the apostle Peter could relate to Josh Hamilton, because he was a comeback story himself. He went from a foul-mouthed denier of Christ, to a spirit-filled preacher on the day of Pentecost.

5. Peter's restoration conversation in John 21 reminds us that no matter how we have failed, Jesus simply asks us to love Him, just as we are, and to obey His will for us once His forgiveness has restored us.

ⁱ McHenry, Raymond, McHenry's Stories for the Soul, (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2001), p. 169

ⁱⁱ Williams, Jim, New Airport Security System a Little Too Personal, 2/18/2009, cbs2chicago.com, accessed 2/21/09, <http://cbs2chicago.com/local/Transportation.Security.Administration.2.938289.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ David (Michelangelo), *Wikipedia article*, accessed 2/21/09, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_\(Michelangelo\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_(Michelangelo))