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Gospel of John #46
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Sermon Summary #46

The End of the Story is only the Beginning **John 21:1-25**

Well, we did it! We finally reached the conclusion of our journey in John's gospel. If you include the 24 weeks we spent in John 13-17 back in 2016, we devoted 70 weeks in total to this remarkable book.

Some who study John's gospel suggest that we should simply ignore this final chapter. It doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the gospel account of the life and ministry of Jesus. They insist that there is very little, if anything, of spiritual or practical value in these verses. I disagree. And I believe that once you look closely at them with me, you will also agree that there is much for us to learn here.

Jesus, Peter, the Fish, and Breakfast on the Shore (vv. 1-14)

What are we to make of Peter's decision to go fishing (v. 3)? He has just witnessed the risen Christ and received an impartation of both peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. Some have argued that Peter and the others are guilty of utter indifference toward what has just happened. That they would so quickly return to something as mundane as fishing reflects badly on their zeal and commitment to the commission that Jesus has just given them.

On the other hand, it seems better for Peter and the others to engage in some sort of meaningful activity rather than waste their time doing nothing. And, after all, they still had to eat! And yet again, it seems unlikely that this is the sort of behavior we would expect to see after Pentecost. Once the Spirit has fallen on them fully and filled them for ministry, they could think of nothing else but proclaiming the gospel of the risen Savior.

Once again we are told that the followers of Jesus didn't recognize him. Neither Mary Magdalene nor the disciples on the Emmaus Road instantly recognized Jesus. Here again they don't know who it is that is shouting at them from the shore. It may have been so early in the morning that they simply couldn't see him clearly from a distance of 100 yards.

If you're wondering why Jesus told them to throw their nets on the right side of the boat, it can only be because he knew there was a large school of fish there. You may recall that a similar incident is recorded for us in Luke 5. There we are told that the disciples hadn't caught any fish until Jesus told them to put out their nets once again:

“And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. . . . But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken” (Luke 5:6, 8).

Peter's reaction was undoubtedly due to the fact that he suddenly realized that Jesus was Lord even over the fish of the sea. Every creature on earth is known to him. He knows where all the mosquitos are and all the apple trees and every ant and spider. He exerts sovereign authority over every blade of grass and knows the number of hairs on your head.

I find it interesting that Peter's verbal response is to confess that he is “a sinful man.” Why? I think it's because the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over the natural creation, such as fish, signaled to Peter the holiness and majesty of Jesus. Peter doesn't so much marvel at the power of Jesus as he does the difference between himself and Jesus. Jesus is immeasurably holy and righteous and Peter instantly sees himself in comparison with the Lord of the fish!

When the others finally arrive on shore, they are invited to join Jesus for breakfast. Although this isn't the primary point of the story, I do think it supports the belief that although Jesus had a glorified and resurrected body, he could still enjoy a good meal! We will have bodies like his, free from disease and weakness, but we will still be able to enjoy all the food that God will provide when we join him on the new earth in the age to come. We won't have to eat

in order to live. We will eat because we like it!

So, what is the significance, if any, of the number of fish being mentioned: 153? The church father, Jerome, sometime in the 4th century a.d., suggested that there are 153 different species of fish. On this theory, the catch of fish was “an acted parable of the fruitful mission of the church that draws . . . all human beings without distinction” (Carson, 672).

Most believe that this is another example of what is called *Gematria*. This points to the fact that every Hebrew or Greek word has a numerical value. You may recall that in Revelation, the name of the Roman emperor Nero is 666.

This led some to point back to Ezekiel 47:9-10 which describes the water flowing out from below the threshold of the temple. We read:

“And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea” (Ezek. 47:9-10).

Now, follow closely. In Hebrew, “En” is the word for “spring” and “Gedi” has the numerical value of 17. “Eneglaim” has the numerical value of 153. And 153 is the triangular number of 17. If you are wondering what a triangular number is, here is an example. Add 1 + 2 + 3 all the way up to 17 and you get 153! If this theory is correct, the number 153 might represent the places where gospel fishermen are to spread their nets.

There are other theories. Augustine pointed out that 17 is the sum of 10 + 7, the 10 representing the ten commandments and the seven pointing to the seven-fold Spirit of God in Revelation 1:4. Others have pointed out that 153 is the number for the words “church of love” in Hebrew and “children of God.” The Greek words “Simon” and “fish” add up to 153.

Quite honestly, I don’t know what to believe. Maybe the number has no special symbolic or spiritual significance. We will probably never know.

Jesus and Peter (vv. 15-19)

It’s important for you to know that what happens next in this conversation between Jesus and Peter was conducted in the presence of all the disciples. We read in v. 15 that “when *they* had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter.” “They” is clearly a reference to all of them. Let’s not forget that Peter had boasted publicly that he would never deny or abandon Jesus. So here Jesus gives him the opportunity to publicly reaffirm his commitment.

When Jesus asks him, “Do you love me more than these,” he may mean one of two things. (1) Do you love me more than you love these disciples? But that doesn’t seem likely. (2) Do you love me more than these other disciples love me? Surely it is the latter. Peter had loudly declared in the upper room, “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). Jesus here gives Peter the opportunity to make clear to all the others that he truly is whole-hearted in his devotion and commitment to Jesus.

Jesus asks the question three times. Let me briefly say that some have wanted to make much of the fact that the word translated “love” in the first two instances is *agapaō*, but in the third question it is *phileō*. The argument is that “*agape*” love is stronger than “*phileo*” love. The problem is that in multiple places in the NT the two words are used interchangeably.

For example, in John 3:35 the Father is said to “love” the Son, and *agapaō* is used, whereas in John 5:20 the Father is said to “love” the Son and *phileō* is used. Jesus is twice said to have “loved” Lazarus and again both verbs are used (John 11:5, 36). One fascinating example is 2 Timothy 4:10 where Demas is regrettably described, indeed rebuked, for having “loved” this present world. There the verb *agapaō* is used. If that verb always points to a divine and sacrificial form of love, a higher quality of love, it is strange that Paul would have used it instead of *phileō*.

My point is simply that John’s use of two different words for “love” is purely stylistic. They are synonymous, interchangeable terms that carry no special theological significance.

But of greatest importance for us today is the fact that Jesus asks him this question *three times*. I hardly need to remind you that Peter had openly and angrily denied Jesus three times during the course of his trial. Our Lord is graciously giving Peter the opportunity to repent just as publicly as he had rejected Jesus publicly. For each denial of Jesus, Peter now has the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus.

What are we to learn from this? Several lessons.

First, there is no sin in Peter's life nor in yours that cannot be forgiven, including the sin of defiantly denying that you even know Jesus. That is a horrendous sin. Some of you may have committed what you regard as horrendous and unforgiveable sins. But with Jesus there is always forgiveness! With Jesus there is always opportunity to repent! With Jesus there is always grace and kindness and patience and longsuffering and mercy. Don't ever think you are disqualified or cast aside or forever removed from intimacy with Jesus because of your sin. Peter probably thought his ministry was over. But he was wrong.

Think for a moment about what we often try to do when we have sinned badly and failed Jesus. We try to make up for it. We try to atone for our transgressions. We mistakenly think that if we would only do more good works or give more money or sing louder during times of corporate praise that we might be able to erase from our conscience the defiling stain of sin.

Peter could have tried this. He easily could have embraced a works mentality, according to which a certain number of good deeds might eventually outweigh his bad deeds. But no. When Peter finally realized that it was Jesus standing on the shore, calling out to them to put their nets on the other side of the boat, he instinctively jumps into the water and swims and runs to the only one who could heal his heart and erase the memory of his three-fold denial. The invitation "to affirm his love three times drowned out the echoes of his betrayal that haunted him" (Burge, 596). Back in John 18:18 Peter stood over a charcoal fire and denied Jesus. Now, in John 21:9, he and Jesus stand over yet another charcoal fire as he enjoys the fruit of forgiveness.

Second, some would argue that Peter was forever disqualified from any form of ministry in the church. But look at what Jesus says to him: "feed my lambs" (v. 15), "tend my sheep" (v. 16), and "feed my sheep" (v. 17). **Jesus recommissions Peter to ministry**: "Be a shepherd and a pastor to my people," says Jesus. "You may have thought that your denial of me permanently destroyed any hope that I could use you to feed and teach and encourage and lead my people. But it didn't. Take care of my sheep."

If that were not enough, at the close of v. 19 Jesus tells Peter, "Follow me." Notwithstanding the grievous nature of Peter's sin, Jesus still appeals to him to be a faithful follower.

Third, contrary to what the Roman Catholic Church would have us believe, this interaction does not establish Peter as Pope, as if he has an authority over the "sheep" of God's flock more than others. Remember that Paul exhorted all the Elders of the church at Ephesus to "shepherd" or "pastor" the sheep of God (Acts 20:28) and Peter himself exhorted the Elders to do the same in 1 Peter 5:1-4. In other words, there is nothing in the language of John 21:15-17 that suggests Peter is given a distinctive authority above that which is given to all who minister to the people of God.

Fourth, the question is often asked, "Since Peter was able to minister to the sheep of God's flock following his sin, does this mean that a pastor who has committed adultery can be restored to public ministry in the church?" Many say yes, while others say no. Let me say several things about this.

The word "restored" needs to be defined. Anyone, be it male or female, who has fallen sexually or through some other sin, can be restored to fellowship with God and to fellowship with other Christians in the church. They simply need to repent and confess their sin. Restoration to God and to the body of Christ is always possible. Forgiveness is based on the blood of Christ and can come in an instant. But restoration to a position of authority as a pastor or Elder is something different. I say this because of what the NT says about the qualifications for Elders.

Paul says an Elder "must be above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). For a man to serve in this office he doesn't have to be sinless or perfect, but he does have to live a life that does not expose him to "reproach" in the eyes of others. Paul also says that he must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2), which I take to mean he has to be faithful to his wife; he cannot be guilty of sexual infidelity. An elder also "must manage his own household well" (1 Tim. 3:4). Finally, Paul says "he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace" (1 Tim. 3:7).

Now, is it possible for someone who failed to meet these qualifications, because of sexual infidelity, once again fulfill them through repentance and diligent, humble obedience? In other words, must we think that the failure to fulfill such character traits *permanently* disqualifies a man from being an Elder? Not necessarily.

Let there be no mistake about this one thing: a man who has betrayed his wife and children, who has violated his marriage covenant, has fallen short of these requirements and must be removed from ministry. For how long, you ask? That depends on the extent of his sin and the depth of his repentance. It is scandalous and brings reproach on the gospel and the name of Jesus when men who have lived in unrepentant adultery for a year or longer, perhaps with multiple women, then reinstate themselves in a position of authority after a short time away.

When one lives in unrepentant sexual immorality for a considerable period of time, his heart has become hardened and his capacity to see sin for what it is, is severely impaired. They are hardly the ones who can discern whether or not they are fit for ministry. I believe that, at minimum, a man who commits adultery should immediately resign and get another job. If, over time, he shows signs of true, humble, heartfelt repentance, then *perhaps* he can be restored to a position of spiritual authority in the church.

Anyone who has sinned in this way, if he repents and acknowledges his sin and commits himself to walk in sexual purity can be restored back into fellowship with the church. He can be received and loved and affirmed as a brother in Christ, and admitted to share in the Lord's Supper. But that is entirely different from saying that he can or should be put in a position of spiritual authority.

There is nothing in Scripture that explicitly prohibits a man from being restored to the office of Elder after having committed adultery. I suppose it also depends on the nature of his infidelity. If someone has repeatedly committed adultery, perhaps with several women, and refused to repent and never willingly confessed his sin but instead was simply "caught in the act," I am reluctant to admit that restoration to ministry would be possible. Even if possible, it may not be wise. But if someone committed a one-time act of sexual infidelity and freely, at his own initiative, confesses and repents and seeks counseling and places himself under the loving discipline of the church, in such a case perhaps restoration to the office of Elder is possible.

It is certainly the case that King David in the OT committed adultery with Bathsheba. He also was complicit in the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. And David was restored to leadership in Israel and even wrote many of his psalms after his sin. But David was also deeply convicted and repented of his sin. One need only read Psalms 32 and 51 to see something of the attitude of his heart. If you should ask whether or not David could meet the requirements of an Elder, had he lived during the time of the New Covenant, my answer would probably be, No.

All this to say that serving in a senior leadership position in the local church requires that a man live in such a way that people can grow to trust him again. As I said, forgiveness can happen in an instant. But trust most often has to be built up over time and only as people grow in their confidence that a person will not betray them yet again.

One more thing should be noted about this interaction between Jesus and Peter. In vv. 18-19 Jesus makes it clear that Peter will die by crucifixion. The words, "stretch out your hands" in v. 18 was standard terminology in the first century describing crucifixion. Some traditions have said that Peter requested that he be crucified upside down. We can't know if this actually happened, but we can be certain that his death by crucifixion glorified God. He faithfully retained his confession of Christ even in the face of this horrific means of execution. Most believe that he suffered this form of martyrdom in Rome, at the command of the emperor, Nero.

Jesus and John (vv. 20-24)

Evidently, John was following along behind Jesus and Peter, no doubt listening to their conversation (v. 20). Peter obviously wonders if John will die like he will. Will John also glorify God by his death, or am I alone to be remembered for that? We can't be sure, but this may be yet another example where one disciple is comparing himself with another. Any sort of competition or rivalry in the church will destroy the work of the ministry and our testimony of Jesus. Each of us has to embrace his/her calling and faithfully fulfill it, regardless of how Jesus chooses to make use of others.

In any case, when Peter asked Jesus, "what about this man?" Jesus in effect says, "Peter, it's none of your business!" Neither Peter nor John are belittled by Jesus. But Jesus wants them both to understand that he has different plans for them. Peter is martyred in about 66-68 a.d., while John lives to a ripe old age and dies in isolation on the island of

Patmos, probably in around 95 a.d.

All of those who follow Jesus are living and ministering under the same mandate to follow him. After that, there are distinctions in what each is called to do, where they are called to do it, and for how long.

Some in the early church may have taken this to mean that John would never die, that he would remain alive right up until the Second Coming of Jesus at which time he, like all believers, would receive his glorified and resurrected body just like that of Jesus. Thus, the rumor likely spread that as long as John remained alive, Jesus could return at any time. Did this create anxiety in the early church when John finally died and Jesus had not come back? Perhaps. But note carefully: Jesus does not say he will in fact come back before John dies. He only says to Peter, “**IF** it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

John proceeds to bear witness to the credibility of his own testimony in v. 24. Some are confused that John would write, “**we** know that **his** testimony is true.” Why didn’t he write, “**I** know that **my** testimony is true”? But John and other NT authors often use what we call the “editorial” we, as when he wrote in John 1:14, “we have seen his glory.” You will often hear me say something like, “If we remain in unbelief we shall never know the truth about Jesus.” I’m not saying that I am personally in unbelief. It is simply a way of identifying with my audience.

Not all the books in the world (v. 25)

This statement in v. 24 is a good reminder to us that we should never conclude that Jesus didn’t do something or didn’t perform a particular kind of miracle simply because the NT doesn’t explicitly record it. You may recall that back in John 20:30 we are told that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.” We can’t even begin to imagine the number or nature of the miracles Jesus performed that, if recorded and written down, would fill an untold number of books.

Is John using hyperbole in v. 25? Is he simply exaggerating in order to make his point? That is the view that most commentators take. But D. A. Carson has pointed out that “the Jesus to whom he bears witness is not only the obedient Son and the risen Lord, he is [also] the incarnate Word, the one through whom the universe was created. If all his deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed” (686).

Conclusion

As we come to the close of our time in John’s gospel, let me remind you once again of four critically important themes that we encountered over and over again. They are not the only important things that John wrote about, but they are central to his purpose.

First, at the very heart of Christianity is the truth that the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, became incarnate in human flesh. John said it this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1,14). Jesus Christ, therefore, is both God and man, simultaneously. He is not more God than man nor more man than God. He is perfectly and completely both: the God-man.

If you should ask why this is so important, let me remind you of what John also said in his first epistle.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already” (1 John 4:2-3).

If you do not believe that Jesus is God in human flesh, you are under the influence of the spirit of antichrist.

Second, there is no hope whatsoever for the forgiveness of sins and the experience of eternal life unless you believe in Jesus and Jesus only. Trusting him for who he is and what he has done is non-negotiable. John repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of faith. Over and over he testified that it is “by believing” that “you may have life in his name” (John 20:31; see also 1:12; 3:16-18). Hear again John’s unmistakable declaration:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6).

Third, true faith in Christ, the sort of belief that truly saves and brings forgiveness and eternal life, is the sort of faith that produces love and obedience and a hunger for God’s Word.

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31).

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

“Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21).

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words” (John 14:23-24).

Fourth, we are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on the works of Jesus and to be the means by which his mission is brought to consummation.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22).

Perhaps the best way to conclude this series in John’s gospel is with the reminder of its most famous verse. May God help and empower us to take this gospel to all people, proclaiming the good news that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).