

The Necessity of Humility

John 21:1-15-19

B.I: Those who distrust themselves and depend entirely upon Christ will be God's choice instruments for building His church.

LTS: Psalm 84

It is early morning one week after the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples have dutifully obeyed the message received from the Lord that they should proceed up to Galilee where they would see Him again as their resurrected Lord. In their restlessness while waiting for Him, however, they chose to do something to pass the time and keep them occupied; something that they were good at due to years of experience. They went fishing.

All night long they dropped their nets in the water and brought them up empty. Presumably this happened over and over again until the day began to break and they heard a voice from the shadows on the shore (5), "Children, do you have any fish?" Now that had to be a humbling question, to which they responded, "No." "Then cast you net on the right side of your boat and you will find some." Dutifully, they obeyed the voice and suddenly there was a great catch of fish. One hundred and fifty three of them to be exact! The risen Christ had performed a miracle just for them.

We learn from this story that the secret to fruitfulness in this life is not in our talents, giftedness, or natural abilities but in the power of the risen Christ. Jesus was once again teaching by example that their success in ministry will be "not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord"

(Zech. 4:6). As Jesus had taught His disciples earlier, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing.”

At this point in the gospel narrative the disciples were still trying to make sense out of what had happened to Jesus and what it all meant for them. They needed to know that God still had a plan for them and that they would possess the power to achieve it. This was especially true of Peter because if there was any disciple (besides Judas) who may have completely disqualified himself from ministry it was Peter.

On the very night Jesus was betrayed and arrested Peter had vehemently denied the Lord three times – the last of the three with great oaths! To save his own skin Peter had actually disowned Jesus and claimed he didn’t even know the man! Can we even begin to imagine the guilt he experienced for this terrible sin against His Lord! Turn with me back to John 13. This is where Peter really sets Himself up for this terrible fall.

Read John 13:36-38

Matthew’s account of this same event makes Peter’s words even more emphatic (Mat. 26:31–33),

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.’ 32 “But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” 33 But Peter said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”

But when the time came to make good on that promise Peter did not prove to be as strong and courageous as he had claimed. Before the rooster crowed that very morning he had disowned the Lord three times.

Now in chapter 21 the disciples are seeing Jesus for the third time as a group since the resurrection. They drag the miraculous catch of fish to the shore and Jesus invites them to come and have breakfast with Him. But then, after breakfast Jesus and Peter have an important conversation. And in this interplay between Jesus and Peter I see two things:

I. Peter's Humbling Restoration:

II. Peter's Humbling Expectation:

I. Peter's Humbling Restoration:

Read 21:15-17

1. I have come to love this portion of Scripture. I suppose that's because I have so often stood in Peter's shoes. No, I don't have Peter's natural leadership ability and I don't tend to be an impetuous man of action like Peter was, but I know what it's like to be unfaithful to my Lord. I know what it like to sin and feel the kind of guilt and shame that can cause a man to question whether God's patience is big enough to keep Him from disowning me completely. And I suspect you have experienced that as well. Some of you are feeling that even now as you quietly sit in church and pretend everything is ok... but you know it's not ok.

2. For people like me and so many of you, this dialogue between Jesus and Peter is precious and full of hope because it reminds us in vivid display that our Lord is a patient and forgiving Savior, and He delights to use broken people to magnify the glory of His name in this world.

3. There were seven disciples at the breakfast fire that morning, but of them Jesus specifically singles out Peter. You see, it was necessary for Peter to be restored but it would be a humbling restoration. Of all the disciples none had made so

high a profession. None had spoken so confidently of his own spiritual strength. None had shown such instability in the hour of trial. None had fallen so sadly by denying his Master three times. If Peter was to be a prominent leader of this fledgling church he would have to be restored by the risen Christ. And John's first readers needed to be reassured that Peter had been fully restored to ministry by Christ Himself.

4. Verse 15 tells us that when they finish breakfast Jesus looks over at Peter (presumably in front of all the other men) and begins to speak. "Simon, son of John..." Hum. Jesus is calling him by his full formal name. Now he knows he's in trouble.

A. This is an interesting way for Jesus to begin his questions. There were two ways Jesus typically addressed Peter. When Peter was doing what he should Jesus referred to Him as Peter (i.e. "rock").

B. However, when Peter stepped out of bounds and flubbed things up Jesus tended to address him more formally by calling him "Simon." The fact that Jesus is addressing him as "Simon son of John" here is a pretty clear indicator that He intends this to be a word of rebuke.

5. Now notice Jesus' question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" The question that naturally arises here is, what are the "these"? Was Jesus asking, "Do you love me more than you love the other disciples?" Considering the frequent rivalry between the twelve, that seems unlikely. Was He asking "Do you love me more than your boat, nets, and fishing gear?" The fact that Peter took the disciples fishing that night has led some to believe Peter was tempted to return to his former trade as a fisherman. But in my mind that seems difficult to substantiate. I think the best way to understand Jesus' question is to hear Him asking, "Do you love me more

than these other disciples love me?” Is your love for me greater and stronger than theirs?

6. Now, if Jesus is going to rebuke and restore Peter, why do you suppose He begins by questioning his love? Of course we all know that loving God is a really important thing. In Deuteronomy Moses gave us the Shema, “Hear, oh Israel! the Lord our God the Lord is One. And you shall ... LOVE the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul, and with all of your strength.” This is the greatest commandment. More than anything else, we are to love God. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to make this a test of salvation when He told the Pharisees in John 8:42, “If God were your Father you would... LOVE Me!” They didn’t love Jesus and that demonstrated that God was not their Father (no matter how religious they were).

7. With this in mind it makes sense the Jesus would question Peter’s love. Peter had denied His Lord three times! Is it possible to deny the Lord AND love the Lord? My answer to that question is, I hope so. I hope its possible to be a true child of God and yet on occasion really mess up. I don’t mean to say that sin doesn’t matter. It does! It really matters! I just need to know that the grace of Jesus is grater than ALL MY SIN!

8. Jesus, the wonderful Counselor, is performing spiritual heart surgery on Peter, and He’s in no hurry to get it over with. He is not sparing Peter the pain of having His sin exposed. He asks essentially the same question three times – “Do you love me... Do you love me... Do you love me.” He could have asked, “Peter, do you promise never to fail me again?” But Jesus knew better than to ask a question like that because OF COURSE Peter would fail Him again! In fact, you need only turn to Galatians 2 to find Paul rebuking Peter publically for messing up again!

9. What Peter needed to learn is that God does NOT accept him based on his own righteousness but on Christ for Righteousness! So to the question, “Do you love me more than these other men love me, the answer is “Yes, Lord. “You know that I love you.” I take that to mean, “I love you without any comparison to the love my brothers may have for you.” Note Peter is decidedly NOT appealing to his own strength and loyalty as proof of his love, but only to the perfect knowledge of Jesus. He knows that Jesus sees exactly what is inside him. By his denials he has proven that his love is just as fallible as everyone else’s love for Him. It is an imperfect love. It is sometimes a weak love. And Peter needed to see how weak it really was – how weak he really was.

10. Do you remember what the Lord said to Paul after he prayed three times that the Lord would remove the thorn in the flesh? Three times the Lord said no. Why? Because my grace is sufficient for you, and My strength is made perfect in... weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

11. You see, if Peter was going to be useful to the Master for building His church he first needed to be humbled. He needed to see how weak he really was. He needed to see how dependent upon the power and grace of Jesus he really was. And for this reason we should never despise the Lord’s discipline. As the author of Hebrews says (12:6), “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and he scourges every son whom He receives....” The Lord is determined to teach us how weak, dependent, and sinful we really are so that we will stop looking to ourselves and begin looking to Him alone for all we need in our pursuit of life and godliness.

12. I suspect puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, was thinking of this when he wrote:

The humble Christian studies his own unworthiness: he looks with one eye upon grace to keep his heart cheerful, and with the other eye upon sin to keep it humble. Better is that sin which humbles me, than that duty which makes me proud. (“duty” means obedience).

13. There were three denials, therefore Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me.” And each time Peter appealed to the all-knowing mind of Jesus by saying, “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.” Upon the third time Jesus asked him “Do you love me?” we read (17), “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and He said to him, ‘Lord! You know EVERYTHING: You know that I love you.’”

14. Notice how Jesus responds to Peter each time. He could have said, “No you don’t, Peter! You proved your lovelessness in the courtyard after I was arrested. I heard you cursing and swearing in your declaration that you didn’t even know me! How dare you say you love me!” But Jesus didn’t respond like we would be tempted to respond. Jesus wasn’t punishing Peter for His sin. Jesus had just born Peter’s sin in His body on the cross! He was restoring him! He wasn’t trying to crush him, He was seeking to revive him! Jesus paid for all of Peter’s sins on the cross! Behold the unfathomable GRACE of Christ!

15. So how did Jesus respond to Peter’s answers? “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Fee my sheep.” In other words, “Peter, I’m NOT finished with you yet. Your sin has not disqualified you from serving me. If your sin has humbled you then you are more qualified now than you ever thought you were before. Now go. I entrust my sheep, my little lambs, my people to your care.

16. Isn't this a marvelous demonstration of the grace of God? He is not surprised by our weaknesses. As the Psalmist said (103:14),

For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust. 15 As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. 16 When the wind has passed over it, it is no more, And its place acknowledges it no longer. 17 But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children...

17. If God is going to accomplish anything in this world He will have to use broken people like you and me – people who need to repent, grow, and change as a lifestyle. And if we are going to help anyone else change then we will be (as Paul Tripp puts it), broken people in need of change helping broken people in need of change.” This is an apt description of the apostle Peter. And it is an apt description of you and me.

18. This was Peter's Humbling Restoration. But there is one more thing to see in this text.

II. Peter's Humbling Expectation: (18-19)

Read 18-19

1. There is little doubt that John wrote these words AFTER Peter had already been executed by crucifixion in Rome. Tradition says that Peter told his executioners to crucify him up-side-down because He was unworthy to die like his Lord. There is no way to verify the truthfulness of that story, but we do know that in the end Peter's hands were “stretched out” on a cross just as Jesus had said.

2. I suspect John wanted the early church to know that not only did Peter was restored to ministry by Christ Himself, but in the end he died faithfully. By the power of God's grace Peter would not deny his Lord again though it cost him his life.

3. Finally John writes (19), "After saying this [Jesus] said to him, "Follow Me." These are the same words Jesus used to make Peter His disciple all the way back in the beginning – "Follow Me."

4. That is what a disciple of Jesus Christ is. We are those who FOLLOW Christ. We take our cues NOT from culture but from Christ. We love what He loves. We go where He sends. We say what He said. We do what He had told us to do. And we do so not by our own strength or power, but as dependent children – as branches who are connected to the vine for the purpose of bearing fruit. And by His grace we who have been humbled by our sin become sharp instruments in the Master's hand for building His church.

5. We are fallible. We are faltering. But we are His disciples. We love Him and we are unspeakably blessed by the fact that He chooses to use us.

B.I: Those who distrust themselves and depend entirely upon Christ will be God's choice instruments for building His church.