

John When Fishing Just Won't Do

John 21:1-24

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Turn with me now to John, chapter twenty-one. We are coming to the very last study in the Gospel of John, chapter twenty-one, and I want to read the chapter in its entirety, beginning at the first verse.

Afterward Jesus appeared again to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias....”
“It happened this way. Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were together. ‘I’m going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord.’ As soon as Simon Peter heard him say ‘it is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around him, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from the shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; but even with so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come, and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said. ‘You know that I love You.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord. You know that I love You.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of My sheep.’ The third time, He said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you

love Me?' Peter was hurt because He had asked him the third time, 'do you love Me?' And he said, 'Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You.' Jesus said, 'Feed My sheep.' 'I tell you the truth, when you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then He said to him, 'Follow me.' Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them; this was the one who had leaned back on Jesus at the supper, and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him he asked, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus answered, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow Me.' Because of this the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die; but Jesus did not say that he would not die, He only said, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?' This is the disciple who testifies to these things, and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

I. Failure.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?" It's a searching question, isn't it, to have Jesus ask you specifically, pointedly, "Do you love Me?" Peter had left Jerusalem. He's gone—what?—a hundred miles or so north to Galilee, which is where he's from. He's gone back to his former way of life. He's gone back to fishing. Peter and the rest of the disciples have been following Jesus for the last three years. Peter was a married man, presumably with a family. Now that Jesus has died, He's revealed Himself to the disciples in the upper room, disappeared again...Peter has gone home, gone back to his former way of life.

And in this closing chapter of John's Gospel, in a sense you might expect John to have actually finished the Gospel at the end of chapter twenty. After all, at the close of chapter twenty he gave us the reason why he wrote the Gospel of John. He wrote in order that the signs and miracles that he writes about Jesus would convince those who read the Gospel of the truthfulness of Jesus, that they might put their faith and trust in Him, and that they might have everlasting life.

But there's one more thing, because John, as he writes the Gospel, doesn't only want to tell us about the way of salvation, he also wants to write to us about discipleship. He wants to write to us and tell us what it looks like to follow Jesus Christ; and what better person to pick out, as it were, than the Apostle Peter—Peter, who had so catastrophically denied Jesus publicly three times in the open

courtyard during the night of Jesus' betrayal.

John doesn't actually tell us this. This is not the first resurrection appearance of Jesus that Peter has seen. Luke records for us in very brief compass that Jesus had in fact appeared to Simon Peter earlier. The details of that appearance, we are not given. It must have been extraordinarily painful for Peter to have to look Jesus in the face in so brief a compass through the period of time in which he had denied his Lord three times.

And now, here in chapter twenty-one, some time has passed. Simon Peter has gone back to his fishing business. We're introduced at the very beginning of the chapter to the Sea of Tiberias, or the Sea of Galilee. There are others there: Thomas called Didymus, that we were considering on Sunday evening—he is there; Nathanael of Cana in Galilee is there; the sons of Zebedee, including, therefore, John, the author of the Gospel. And Simon says in verse three, "I am going fishing."

Now, you understand that when Simon Peter says, "I'm going fishing," it's not like the sort of thing that some of you do on a Friday or a Saturday or whenever it is that you go fishing and you go to these swampy, brown, muddy waters of Mississippi where you can't see the bottom of the river, or the pond or the lake—you've no idea what's in there, you've no idea what it is you've caught when you pull it out of that dirty water. I did fishing when I was little, you know, but as the Scripture says, "When I became a man I put away childish things." I'm not a fisherman. I just don't see the...I just don't see the fun in fishing, but each to his own, I understand that.

When Simon Peter says, "I'm going fishing," it's not like, you know, the "guy thing." You know, a man thing, that he wants to be alone or he wants to be with the guys, or he wants to be with the sons, sitting by a river, ninety degrees, ninety-eight percent humidity...that's not what Peter is talking about. This was the way Peter earned his living. This was his job. This is what he did. This is what he knew something about. If you asked Simon Peter, "Simon Peter, tell us what you do." You know, some of you would say, "I move money around." Some of you would say, "I'm a lawyer." Same thing! Some of you will say, "I'm a doctor..." whatever it is that you say. But you ask Simon Peter, "What do you do," and Simon Peter would say, "I'm a fisherman. That's what I do. I catch fish. I know something about fishing."

And do you understand the significance of what Peter is saying here? He's failed. He's failed the Lord. He's failed Jesus. Is there anyone in this room tonight who doesn't understand what it means to fail? Not just to fail at some task or other, but to fail in your discipleship, to let Jesus down; to promise Jesus something, and then catastrophically and publicly let Him down. The sense of failure...do you know that that can cripple people? There are some people who, if they had done what Peter had done, they would never get over it. There would be some people

in therapy for the rest of their lives. They couldn't wake up in the morning, they couldn't go through the day, they couldn't face life without this crippling, debilitating thought that they'd let the Savior down. How could Simon Peter ever be an apostle? How could Simon Peter ever be useful in the kingdom of God ever again, having done what he had done?

And so, Simon Peter says, "I'm going fishing" because at least I know something about fishing. That's something I know about. The Sea of Galilee—it's not that big—if you stood on one side of the Sea of Galilee, you could see the other side. It's a beautiful, clear blue water. You can see the bottom of the Sea of Galilee. He knew where the fish were. I'm sure Simon Peter could talk to you with great expertise about the various weather patterns in the hills that surround Galilee, especially to the north and to the east, and how sudden temperature changes and pressure changes (he wouldn't use the language of the twenty-first century, of course)—but he knew when storms were about to come. He knew what happened to fish, and where they would go. It wasn't that big of a lake.

And you see what happens: at dawn, a shadowy figure is seen on the shore, there about a hundred yards from the beach. And this voice cries out, "Friends, have you caught something?" You know, if Simon Peter had actually caught something the question might not be as irritating...but you know, when you've actually caught nothing, and somebody says, "have you caught something?"—especially, perhaps in the mood that Simon Peter was in, gone back to the fishing business because he'd been a failure at discipleship, and this nagging thought now begins to grow in his mind. Actually, he's caught absolutely nothing. And this voice says, you know, 'Drop down your nets on the other side of the boat.'

Right. Who is this man? Who is this? They'd been there all night trying to catch some fish, and they'd caught nothing. And this voice from the shoreline says 'drop down your nets on that side.' I don't know, you know, what the expression was on Simon Peter's face when he threw those nets down on the other side and then suddenly begins to feel the tension in the nets as the live fish are beginning to pull the nets hither and yon, and he can sense that this isn't just two or three fish: there's a lot of fish here. And it's John, the author of the Gospel, that recognizes this is Jesus, and Simon Peter—you know, Look-Before-You-Leap Simon Peter—dons his outer garment because he had stripped it because he was fishing, and he was hot—leaps into the water, and half wading and half swimming perhaps, and half trying to walk in that ungainly fashion, and he's making his way to Jesus.

II. The lesson.

What's the lesson? There's a wonderful lesson, and it's humbling lesson, and it's a painful lesson: that Jesus would not allow Simon Peter to catch one solitary

fish, because that was not what Jesus wanted him to do.

You know, isn't that a mercy? Because, in a sense, Simon Peter is running away. In a sense, Simon Peter is trying to go back to his former way of life, and it's as though Jesus is saying, "No. You want to catch fish, you will catch fish only at My behest. You'll catch more fish than you've ever dreamed of, but only at My behest." A hundred and fifty-three...but do you notice in the story, and John makes it very, very clear—read the text very carefully—you know, Jesus says to them, "Bring the fish," because they're going to have breakfast. Isn't that a wonderful scene, by the way? This is Jesus in His resurrection body, and He's having breakfast. Those of you who love food, maybe there'll be food in heaven, too. Don't despair!

Isn't it an extraordinary thing that John points out to you that Jesus already had fish cooking? Even though He says to Simon Peter, "bring your fish," He has already got the fish that they're going to eat for breakfast. Now that's a little detail. It's a small little detail, but do you see how Jesus is sort of rubbing it in a little bit? That even the fish that they're going to enjoy for breakfast isn't the fish that Peter has caught. It's got nothing to do with him.

This is all to do with the supply and providence and governance and control of Jesus; how Jesus puts a boundary and a hedge around our lives. And it's as though He's saying to Peter as the disciple who's trying to run away, "I'm not going to let you run away, because I've got something for you to do."

I don't know about you, but I find that wonderfully encouraging. You've let the Savior down? Well, Jesus won't let you run away. Running away isn't the answer. Running back to your former life isn't the answer. Going off by yourself and having a pity party isn't the answer. Isn't that an encouraging truth, that at every step of the way, Jesus is watching over Simon Peter?

But in order to do that, notice what Jesus has to do. He has to humble him. He has to humble him. It's as though even though Peter has met the Lord in the encounter that Luke talks about, there's still more humbling for Jesus to do in the life and heart of Simon Peter. It's all about being brought down to size. It's all about the way Jesus can sometimes prick that balloon of pride, and just reveal to us how small we are, how little we are, how without Him we can do nothing. Peter couldn't even catch fish, which is what he knew something about. Peter couldn't even do that without the help and the power and the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

You know the problem with some Christians is like modern textiles that boast that they're shrink-resistant. And some Christians—maybe it's you, and maybe it's me tonight—we like to think of ourselves as shrink-resistant. And Jesus, if you're going to be useful in His kingdom, says, "I'm going to shrink you. I'm going to humble you. I'm going to teach you to lean upon Me with all of your might."

III. The requirement for true discipleship.

Now Jesus asks Simon Peter this three-fold question. I'm not going to go into all of the grammatical whys and wherefores. Older commentators tend to think that in the Greek of the way Jesus asks this question, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" and in the third occasion He asks it, He uses a different Greek word, that somehow that's meant to be deeply, deeply significant. And older commentators made great, heavy weather of it. It made wonderful fodder for sermons, but actually I don't think it means anything at all. For one thing, they were probably speaking Aramaic rather than Greek, so all of that, I think, has absolutely no significance whatsoever. What is, I think, significant, is that Jesus asks him three times. "Why?" Because Peter had denied Him three times.

You know, it's like a little bell going off in your head, isn't it? I'm quite certain that when Jesus asked him a third time—and don't you get the impression that Peter just got a little bit irritated on the third occasion? Peter was grieved when He said to him the third time—can't you sense the irritation? And just at that point there's a knock at the door of Peter's heart: "Remember, Peter, you denied Me publicly three times, so let Me ask you publicly three times: do you love Me?"

Don't you sense something of Peter's great heart? Don't you love Peter? Don't you love Peter? You know, there's a sense in which Paul can be austere and he's always right!...you know, if the Apostle Paul came in, you know, you'd just salute and say, "Yes, sir," because he's always right. But Peter's like us. I like Peter because you see Peter for all of his warts and all. And don't you sense something of Peter's great heart when he says, "Lord, You know that I love You." And isn't that so often how it is with us? That, "Yes, I love You, Lord Jesus, but I can let you down at the same time." I can let You down, but yes, I love You. And here is Peter in this tension, this warfare, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other—"the good that I would, I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I find I do." And what's the evidence? It's all very well to say, "I love You, Lord. I love You, Lord. I love You, Lord." Wives, when your husbands say "I love you," there's something that says, "Right, but show me how you love me. What's the evidence that you love me?" Words are not enough. Yes, it's important to vocalize those words—that's for Sunday night! That's coming! That's what we've got all summer long.

But you notice how Jesus says, "Tend my sheep. Feed My lambs"—because Jesus was calling Simon Peter to be an apostle, to be a pastor; actually, calling Simon Peter eventually, eventually, to lay down his life for Jesus. And the evidence of Peter's sincerity in stating that he loved the Lord Jesus Christ would be in the way in which he would fulfill what Jesus is now saying to him: feed My sheep, and feed My lambs.

He says in verse eighteen, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.” And John explains that He said this signifying by what death Peter would glorify God, and tradition has it that Simon Peter would be crucified, and he would be crucified upside down, at Peter's own request, outside the city of Rome; and, according to tradition, not far from where the Apostle Paul himself would also be killed, and upside down because he felt unworthy to be identified with his dear Lord and Savior.

And Peter, seeing the Apostle John, says—and it's so Peter-like—“Lord, well, what about him, then?” And Jesus says to him—and you've all heard these words, and some of you have spoken these words, and you've said these words to your children: “Never mind, I'll deal with him later. I'm talking to you now.” You said those words, when one of the other children has been chattering in the background.

As far as you are concerned, Peter, there's only one requirement, and what is that? What is that? Verse twenty-two: “Follow Me.” Follow Me. Follow Me wherever it takes. Follow that road, however difficult it becomes. Actually, commenting on Peter's first epistle, says that God had so ordered the church from the very beginning that death is the way to life, and the cross the way to victory. “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow after Me,” because if you attempt to gain your life, you will lose it. And only if you are prepared to lose your life will you actually gain it.

This is a wonderful chapter. It deserves far more than I have time for, but you see what John is doing at the very close of the Gospel. He's told you all about Jesus. He's told you all about the glory of Jesus. He's told you who Jesus is, and what He's done on behalf of sinners, and now in the very last chapter he's saying, “Now follow Him.” Follow Him wherever He leads you.

Are you prepared to follow Him if He calls you to be a missionary, and leave this country in this week of patriotic celebration of your national identity? Supposing Jesus were to call you to go to a foreign country, are you prepared to follow Him? If He asks you to deny yourself and to take up a cross and to walk down a road of trial and difficulty, will you follow Him, knowing that He will never leave you nor forsake you? If He takes away from you someone you dearly love, and you're all alone, and He says “Follow Me,” will you take His hand in yours and follow Him down that path?

That's what discipleship means: coming to an end of ourselves and giving ourselves entirely to the control and direction of Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for Your word. We bless you for this Gospel of John that we've spent time in this past year. We pray now that you would

make us to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and to be richer and more and more consecrated disciples of Jesus Christ. Lord, You know that we love You. Forgive us, we pray, of those ways in which we fall short; where we stumble just like Peter stumbled. We thank You that there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. Now bless us together in fellowship, enjoyment of the things of God and of one another, and may Your blessing abide upon us now and always. For Jesus' sake. Amen

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