

## Tend My Sheep

John 21:15-25

When I was a kid, splinters seemed to be a common occurrence. I was always playing outside, and always carrying something or climbing something. So I have memories of my mother removing splinters from my hands and fingers. And it hurt. But the only way to get them out was to make them hurt a little bit more. My mother would take a needle, and poke around in the open wound, opening it further by pulling apart the layers of skin, so that the little splinter of wood could be picked out with a pair of tweezers.

That is such a good reminder and a useful illustration of the way in which God works in us, too. To let that splinter represent the presence of sin in our lives, it is obvious to say that pain will often be involved in the process of cutting out that sin. But until that is accomplished, the ongoing presence of the sin will continue to irritate, infect, and cause pain. Just like a splinter.

And, of course, the deeper the splinter, the greater the pain involved in cutting it out. So it is with sin. That is what we have here, in this final text from the gospel of John. Peter had done something horrible. He had consciously, verbally, and publicly denied Jesus. Three times. And before Jesus' days on earth were ended, before the 40th day after the resurrection when he would ascend to the right of God the Father, he came to Peter to remove the splinter.

He does it by challenging Peter to profess his love. "Do you love me?" That is such a penetrating question. Do you love me? It is so challenging. No explanations or excuses can provide a satisfactory answer. The question cuts right to the center of the heart and soul of a man. "Do you love me?"

In general terms, using Peter's experiences as an example, let me proclaim to you that,

### I. JESUS CALLS US TO LOVE HIM.

That is the most basic identification of the true believer. The most basic definition of a Christian. A person who loves God. Paul would write to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 8:3 "But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him."

Now, I don't mean love in the merely superficial or sentimental expressions of trivial experiences. I mean the real thing! The sort of thing that John refers to later when he writes,

1 John 3:18 "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."

So we must be lovers of God, living for his glory and his benefit. And so, when standing before the Lord, particularly when expressing repentance for particular sin, you must all hear this challenge from Jesus, "Do you love me?" For the,

#### A. Expression of love is an essential element of repentance.

Not just, "Are you sorry?" Not even, "I shouldn't have done it." Or, "I won't do it again." But more personally, a response to the question, "Do you love me?"

Let me say this clearly, as something God says to us. "If you say that you love me, but disobey me, you are a liar." John would later write,

1 John 5:3 "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."

In Jesus' exact words,  
John 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

Doesn't that verse also mean, "If you don't keep my commandments, you are not loving me." Never divorce love from obedience. Don't speak of love or seek to define the nature of love without reference to obedience. God won't let you.

And so, when you are dealing with your sin before the Lord, when you are dealing with your disobedience, you must consider this question the Lord posed three times to Peter.

For Peter, that threefold repetition had an obvious reference to the three times Peter had denied Jesus. And the point of the questioning is restoration. And forgiveness. The context makes that so obviously clear. But just like a splinter that went in pretty deep, Peter's sin had gone quite deep. And the cutting away was painful. It was obviously painful for Peter.

It is a painful thing to have to answer that question, for it is painful to think that God would say to us, "I don't think you love me." Or even more pointedly, "You are not loving me." And there is a gentle, fatherly rebuke in the asking of that question, isn't there? Do you love me?

For Peter, God's wise and gracious rebuke was even more pointed. For Jesus said, "Do you love me more than these?" Though there are different opinions among the commentators, I believe the idea is, "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?"

Remember Peter's arrogant boast.

Mat. 26:35 "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!"

Mark 14:29 "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."

He boasted of his own courage and faithfulness. He exalted himself above the other disciples. And he fell the hardest. So now, in the presence of those others, he must answer Jesus' question. And at this point Peter is silent, I believe quite honestly refusing to boast as he had before.

"Do you love me more than these," Jesus asked. And the simple reply. "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

Gone is the arrogance, isn't it? No boasting about loving more than the others. Gone is the boastful self-esteem, the proud self-confidence. And in its place, the humility of repentance. "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

Peter even uses a Greek word with a somewhat more humble and modest meaning, not rejecting the importance of Jesus' use of the Greek word agape, but not daring to speak boastfully as he had earlier. He replies with the Greek word for brotherly love, phileo. "You know that I love you."

So let me ask you that question, not in the context of examining or explaining this conversation between Peter and Jesus. But let me ask the question as a matter of the condition of your own soul. With the words of our text this morning, words found in the living and powerful word of God, which is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart, let me ask you this question, on God's behalf, "Do you love me?" Do you love Jesus? Do you?

If you do, then remember, every time you sin, you act as if you don't love him. So in your repentance, in the pain and sorrow and

grief of repentance, learn to express that love very genuinely and specifically. Not simply, “please forgive me and cleanse me of my sin.” But more than that. When you confess your sins, declare to the Lord your love. “I love you...”

And love, real love, true love, is a commitment, isn't it? When two people get married, they make a commitment. And for all the romance and emotion that is usually involved, the essence of a marriage is a commitment. The essence of marriage is a promise. A vow. A commitment to love. And for those who say that a ceremony or a piece of paper don't mean anything, I say “you are wrong.” They mean everything. Because that ceremony, that piece of paper, as it is so often called, is the definition and expression of a commitment that cannot be broken.

Not a commitment to stay married as long as you love. But a commitment to love as long as you live! Love is not something that you fall into and fall out of. The outward emotional experiences that accompany love may vary from time to time, but that's not the essence of love. The love of a husband is the commitment of a man to say to a woman, I will be faithful to you, and to you alone, as long as we both shall live. Regardless of what happens. Whether rich or poor, in sickness or in health, in joy or in sorrow.

Whether I feel like it or not, I will love you and be faithful to you. That's the commitment of love. And that is the commitment we must make to God, for that,

### **B. Expression of love is an essential element of our commitment to Jesus.**

So Jesus elicits from Peter a great confession, a great commitment. Repeated three times.

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And we read,  
v.17

That grief Peter experienced was a very good thing. It was very good for his soul. For he recognized that his love had failed. And it is the very same grief that we must experience, in humbly expressing our repentance and commitment to the Lord. Jesus calls you to love him. The first and greatest commandment is this,

Mark 12:30 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Then,

### **II. JESUS CALLS US TO FOLLOW HIM.**

That was the message in all of this.

v.19b

And again, v.22b

Jesus had originally called the disciples with these words,

Luke 9:23 “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

That calling had a very personal meaning for Peter. His calling was well defined. “Feed my sheep.” And with that calling, surely we can say that Peter was fully restored and forgiven following his horrible denial. But before we get to that life calling, look at what Jesus says in,

v.18-19

The point there is that,

### **A. We must follow Jesus unto death.**

For Peter, the implication must have been obvious. He had seen Jesus crucified and hung upon a tree. And now he was told that he would lose his own freedom. The future wouldn't be like the past, when he had the go wherever he wanted. What he had to look forward to in his old age was a death which would be comparable to Jesus' own death.

v.18 "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish."

"You will be put to death." For Peter, dying with Jesus wasn't limited to spiritual issues and symbolism. It was nuts and bolts reality. It would be required of him to be found faithful even unto death!

But that first death is not what matters, is it? Physical death is not what is of most importance. For John would later write this word from the Lord in the book of Revelation,

Rev. 2:10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

We must be willing to follow Jesus unto death, if that is what is required of us to glorify him. And that must be your commitment today.

Luke 9:23 "If anyone desires to come after Me, [Jesus said,] let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. 24 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. 25 "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?"

26 "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

Follow Jesus unto death. Yet,

### **B. We must also follow Jesus in life.**

Here I do want to focus a little more on the particular calling of Peter, because it is so helpful and beneficial in understanding the work of the church today.

Peter's calling was to "feed my sheep." Spoken once, with gentle reference to the fragility of those sheep, he says, "feed my lambs." And once, with an overarching emphasis upon the whole nature and work of the shepherd, he says not merely "feed them," but "shepherd them." Take care of them." Translated in verse 16 of the New King James, "Tend my sheep."

Be a shepherd and a pastor for the flock. Now, just to say it quickly, this doesn't mean that Peter assumed any prominence or preeminence among the other disciples. It doesn't mean that he became the first pope, the personalized vicar of Christ upon the earth. It doesn't mean that he had the authority to pass on that absolute right to speak for God and to lead the church to subsequent generations. None of that is properly found in these words.

Rather, Jesus emphasizes the work that must take place in HIS church. And notice, Jesus says, they are MY sheep. The minister, the shepherd, the pastor, in the church of Jesus Christ has a solemn obligation and calling. To be a faithful shepherd over a flock that belongs to God. And that was Peter's calling.

God himself is, of course, our shepherd. The Lord is my

shepherd, in the familiar words of Psalm 23. And Jesus refers to himself with the same language.

John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 "But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 "The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. 14 "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 "As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

Peter himself, in 1 Peter 5 refers to Jesus as the chief shepherd. And then he refers to the other shepherds, having learned well this lesson Jesus taught him here in John 21. These are his words,

1 Peter 5:1 "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."

As you study this conversation between Peter and Jesus, realize that Jesus calls US, too, to follow him. And one final thought.

### **III. JESUS CALLS US TO REMAIN CONTENT WITH OUR OWN LOT.**

You see, Peter wasn't completely rid of his jealous or curious or impulsive nature. So when Peter heard about his future, he immediately asked about John.

v.20-21

And Jesus speaks a word of rebuke.

v.22

"Don't worry about John!" "Don't be a busybody." Mind your own business! Take care of yourself. Those are all appropriate biblical exhortations. Because of that,

#### **A. It is wrong to compare your circumstances with others.**

"Lord, what about this man?" What will happen to him?

We ask that a lot, don't we? Or at least think it. "What about him?" Why did this happen to me? Why not him?

What's behind that? Perhaps jealousy. Perhaps genuine concern. Either way, it's a wrong emphasis. What happens to other people is God's business. What the future holds for other people is part of God's secret will, not yet revealed by historical events. And we must not be burdened with those sorts of things.

There is work to be done, and because Peter seems more concerned about events than about duty, he is rebuked.

v.22 "What is that to you? YOU follow me."

J.C. Ryle puts it this way, "There is a natural desire in men to know the things of others, and neglect their own; and to be more concerned about things to come than things present."

Matthew Henry says this, "Peter seems more concerned for another than for himself. So apt are we to be busy in other men's matters, but negligent in the concerns of our of own souls, quick-sighted abroad, but dim-sighted at home, judging others, and

prognosticating what they will do, when we have enough to do to prove our own works, and understand our own ways.”

I have to think, those words are incredibly convicting today, aren't they? They apply so directly to us. “Quick-sighted abroad, but dim-sighted at home.” The Lord's providence is applied differently to every single one of us, and we need to rest secure in that with pure contentment!

And then, similarly, looking at John's final words, let me end our study of John's gospel together with this great thought,

**B. It is wrong to seek additional revelation from God.**

It's really the same issue, one of contentment. We need to be content with the written word of God which we have received. Content to believe that that word is sufficient. That we have all that we need for life and godliness. That we don't need more. And that we would be worse off if we had more!

That seems to be John's point. First, he proves his own identity and the authenticity of his gospel.

v.24

It is true. What is written is true. And, though there could be much more written, what we have is enough.

v.25

Let me refer back to,

John 20:30 “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

The Bible isn't an exhaustive record of Jesus. He did much more than what has been recorded. But we have a completed record. An authentic record. And a sufficient record. The Bible, the word of truth. And thus I will end our study of John with this great charge to you as a congregation,

2 Tim. 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”