

How to Deal with the Past

John 21:15-25

It was fun last week to zoom out a bit, and look at the resurrection of Jesus from the broader perspective of the whole Biblical narrative. Today we're going to zoom back in and look at a really beautiful passage as we complete our study from the book of John, in his final chapter, 21.

Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene after His resurrection. Then He appeared to the two guys walking the road to Emmaus, and the two guys then went to tell the other disciples what had happened. As they were telling the other disciples about meeting Jesus, there Jesus appeared. I think this appearance of Jesus described in the book of Luke is probably the same appearance John describes in his account, the appearance of Jesus when Thomas wasn't present. ([John 20:19](#)) Then eight days later Jesus appeared again *with* Thomas there. After that, Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and then 2 other disciples (perhaps even the same two that were walking the road to Emmaus)- all these went fishing on the lake. And in very similar fashion to one of the first miracles He did early in His ministry, Jesus called out from the shore, telling them to cast the net on the other side of the boat, and the net became full of an insane amount of fish. 153 *large* fish to be exact. ([John 21:11](#))

Now there's lots of great little details that John mentions in his account, many I believe are mentioned so that we might better grasp the meaning and significance of the events, and others are just simply details recorded because John is vividly describing what happened in an eye witness narrative. Some of the details from John 21 that Pastor Dave walked us through, I want to point out again, because of their bearing on the passage we'll be looking at today. First, notice in [verse 7](#) that it is "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (the author John) who says "*It is the Lord,*" pointing out to Peter that's it's Jesus on the shore. And counterintuitively, Peter puts *on* his outer garment in order to swim ashore. Now, if you have ever attempted to swim with street clothes on rather than swimwear, you know that it is not an easy task. Can you imagine attempting to swim in the traditional "outer wear" robe that they wore during this time period?

The next detail I want you to note is in [verse 9](#). As soon as Peter and the others arrive to shore, they are greeted with a charcoal fire, entering into a fire-side, camp type setting, which surely would have reminded everyone of the charcoal fire mentioned earlier, when Jesus was on trial and Peter denied knowing Jesus to those gathered around the fire. ([John 18:18](#))

Lastly, in [verses 10-11](#) we see that Jesus asks them to bring to Him “some” of the fish caught, and of the 7 men present, it is Peter who jumps up and doesn’t just bring “some” fish as Jesus requested, but rather Peter, *by himself*, drags the heavy bundle of fish through the water onto shore. So, there they are- gathered around Jesus- who is cooking fish and bread on the fire, and then serving them so they could eat. [Verse 15-17](#)...

Peter was surely shaken after that night he emphatically denied Jesus three times. I’m sure he felt like he had let Jesus down, the other disciples down, and himself down. Especially after that last meal they had shared together, when Peter, in front of all the disciples, declared “*Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.*” ([Matthew 26:33](#)) Have you ever made a promise, a commitment, declared a change in your life- only to later do the very thing you vowed never to do again? It’s a terrible feeling. This was Peter. Here he is, and there’s every opportunity in the world for PTSD to creep in- he’s sharing a meal (like the meal in which he declared his allegiance to Jesus), he’s at a campfire (like the campfire on the night of the denial), and he is publicly questioned three times (like on the night of the denial). And the event of the miraculous catch of fish, is reminiscent of the miraculous catch of fish when Peter was first learning of who Jesus was, where he was shaken to his core and cried out “*Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!*” ([Luke 5:8](#)) On top of all that, Jesus gives another nod to Peter’s past by referring to his former name “*Simon, son of John.*”

It’s as if the whole scene has been created in order for Peter to be forced into dealing with the past. As if Peter is having to retrace every mistake, walk through, analyze and deal with his sin step by step, looking through the lens of his love for Jesus. The past can be a difficult thing. So often we want to forget about the past- to not be reminded of our mistakes or the bad things that have happened to us. Now, while it’s not healthy to remain in and dwell in the past, it *is* healthy to look into the past and process it with Jesus’ help, so that we can in a healthy manner move forward into the future Jesus has for us.

I want us to look at how *Jesus* deals with Peter's past mistakes here. But first let's consider how *Peter* is dealing with his past. The details I mentioned earlier give us a bit of a clue. Peter was so focused on the past that he didn't even recognize who it was that was calling out to them from the shore. Even though the very same miracle was performed that was previously a pivot point for Peter in following Jesus, Peter somehow didn't see it. John saw it, and had to snap Peter out of it- "*Hey Peter- dude... you don't recognize that miracle? It was the one that changed your life. Hello? Bro- it's Jesus!*" So Peter snaps out of it, puts on the tunic, and jumps into the water. Now, maybe there's an argument that he put on the tunic out of respect for Jesus, like maybe he was in his underwear on the boat and felt it not proper to approach God Himself, whom He had been ashamed of and denied just a couple weeks ago- maybe under the circumstances it would have been like showing up for your traffic violation at the courthouse wearing a nothing but a bathing suit- maybe- but what I'm seeing here is also a little bit of unnecessary work, of trying a bit too hard, complicating the situation- making things harder than they need to be, almost out of penitence and punishing oneself for previous mistakes.

Then as I mentioned, in [verse 10](#), Jesus tells "*them*"- as in all seven of them, to bring "*some*" fish over, as in enough for each of them to have a satisfying meal. But Peter, perhaps before anyone else could get to it, rushes over by himself, and drags *all* the fish ashore. Talk about being an overachiever. I mean he is working hard here, half punishing himself, and half "kissing up," in a sense, to Jesus. But I don't think Jesus is too impressed by all the extra suffering on Peter's part. Look at how Jesus deals with Peter's past here. You might expect Him to say something like, "*Peter, are you sorry for denying me in front of everyone? You promise never to do it again? If so, then we're good- I forgive you.*" Does he say, "*What were you thinking? Why would you do that?*" No, but those are some of the things we often say when we deal with offering forgiveness to those around us, or to our children, but here Jesus shows us the heart of the matter when dealing with repentance, forgiveness, and grace. Jesus prompts the offender to consider what it is that their heart truly *loves*, and then challenges the offender in how to express that love. Don't miss this truth this morning. So often we are focused on attempting to change our own behavior, or a friend's, parent's, spouse's, or child's behavior, and it's not so much the behavior that needs to be attacked, it's the love of the heart that needs to be re-directed. If we can re-direct the current of the heart's love, then the behavior will fix itself. If we can fall more in love with Jesus we will

become different, better people. If you can prompt your friend, parent, spouse, child to fall more in love with Jesus, they will become different, better people. Stop worrying about the behavior that is a problem- the behavior is only a symptom of the real issue. The real issue, the root of the problem, is the love of the heart. So often we replace a love for Jesus with a love for fun, happiness, money, pride, success- whatever- and if we could only realize that the earthly fun, happiness, money, pride, success will one day be vaporized and that the new reality we will be living in will be a reality constructed of the authenticity in which our hearts loved Jesus.

And Jesus knows that we are going to make mistakes- yes, you and I are going to mess it up. But the heart of Jesus is not a list of do this/don't do that, it's not a heart of beating you down when you mess it up, it's not a heart of shame and guilt- the heart of Jesus is one that is tender, that asks us one question after we screw it up- "*Do you love me?*" In other words, "*Who, or what is it that your heart is loving?*" And our answer is "*Yes, Jesus, I do love you. Forgive me for not showing it, help me to better express my love for You.*" Or our answer is "*No Jesus, I realize am not loving you. Forgive me for not loving You, help me to better see your love for me.*" Because if we could really see His goodness, if we could see through the blinders, distractions and false narratives and really grasp His immense goodness and love for us- the affections of our heart would be drawn to Him like a powerful magnet, and again, we would become changed as a natural result.

Concerning the word "love" in this passage, perhaps you've heard before that the Greek language uses different words for our word "love" in English. There's *eros*- a romantic love. *Phileo*- brotherly love. *Storge*- family bond type love. *Agape*- the unselfish, God-like, faithful and committed love. In the original Greek language used by the author John, he records Jesus as saying first to Peter, "*Simon, son of John, do you agape me, more than these?*" After quickly analyzing his actions, Peter realizes he can't truthfully respond, "*Yes, I agape you*"- (*love you unselfishly, faithfully, with fullness and commitment*)- no, he had screwed that up, so he humbly responds as "*Yes, I phileo-type love you*"- (*you are my brother I love deeply*). The second time, Jesus *again* uses the agape love word in His question, and Peter *again* responds using the phileo love word. But the *third* time Jesus questions, Jesus uses Peter's word for love- *phileo*. "*Simon, son of John, do you phileo love me as a brother?*" And Peter responded "*Yes, I phileo love you.*" The nuance is subtle, but it's as if Jesus basically says, "*Ok, I'll meet you there on your*

level. Let's start with the phileo love." And I believe we can then safely assume that it was Jesus' desire from that point on, to help grow Peter's phileo love into a more complete and solid *agape* love.

We all are wrestling with different things in our hearts, and we probably all express different levels of love or lack of love for Jesus, because of our past. Some of us grew up in church, and have had a great experience- yet we are tempted to "love" Jesus through our traditions, and maybe just recently we are learning how to better walk with Jesus and love Him in a more daily, natural, and authentic relationship. Others of us have had negative experiences with the church, and we've associated those experiences directly with Jesus, which has made it a little more difficult to love Him, and maybe just recently we have begun attempting to heal from those experiences and open our hearts afresh to the possibility of loving Jesus and drawing closer to Him. Maybe there are others that feel your experience with this guy Jesus is totally all *new* in comparison to your past experience, and you're sorting through the desires of your heart even right now as we are gathered. No matter where your heart is, I encourage you to be open to the reality that Jesus wants to show you more of His love, and He wants your heart to be drawn to love Him even more.

Now throughout the bible we can find teaching on examples of what the outward actions and signs look like for one who loves Jesus, but here in this passage Jesus really simplifies the equation. "*Tend My lambs.*" "*Shepherd My sheep.*" "*Tend My sheep.*" He could have said, "*If you love me, then be bold in your witness.*" "*If you love me, then never lie again.*" "*Peter, if you love me, then don't be arrogant in your assessment of your devotion.*" No, Jesus simplifies and comes back to what He had previously laid out as the most important commandments in all of scripture. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. ([Matt. 22:37-38](#)) Love God, love people. If you love God, you will show it by loving people, especially His lambs and sheep who have surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus.

There are subtle nuances here in Jesus' words as well. "*Tend My lambs.*" The word "tend" suggests serving, feeding, patiently giving care to the *lambs*- lambs being the young sheep, the new sheep- the ones still growing. "*Shepherd My Sheep.*" The word "shepherd" suggests perhaps some firmer leading, guiding, and care for sheep- sheep being older, more experienced and "grown" than the

younger lambs. Lastly Jesus says *"Tend My Sheep."* Even older, more experienced and "grown" sheep need tender "lamb-like" care at times. Isn't that where Peter is even right now? He's no new lamb to this, he's walked every day of the past 3 years hearing, seeing, experiencing the presence, work, and teaching of Jesus, and throughout that journey has shown himself in different places: as a mature sheep who Jesus affirmed- as in the time Peter responded to Jesus and said *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* and Jesus in return replied *"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona."* ([Matt. 16:16-17](#)) Minutes later Peter showed himself as a mature sheep who needed firm shepherding as he told Jesus concerning His death *"God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."* And Jesus responded firmly *"Get behind Me, Satan!"* ([Matt. 16:22-23](#)) And here in this passage in John, Peter appears to be a little more like a timid, humble, young lamb, as he responds to Jesus *"I don't know if I'm ready yet for agape loving you, how about phileo love?"*

Just as we each are in different places concerning our heart's love for Jesus, we need to understand that depending on the person and circumstance, we must express His love for others in different ways. There's no question that if we love Jesus, we are to love His church, but that love for His church is sometimes tender, and yet sometimes firm. And the love we show to other followers of Jesus needs to be expressed in ways so that the youngest all the way up to the oldest, can receive it. (even in times when the oldest don't act like they're the oldest) And yes, Peter grew to be a leader in the early church, and yes, this passage is a call to other leaders, pastors, shepherds in the church, but I believe that tending to the flock is a responsibility for us all as followers of Jesus. No matter where you are in your journey with the Lord, no matter what your area of influence, I believe Jesus is calling you to a higher level of love for Himself, and calling you into a higher level of love for His people. And if we could solidify in our hearts our love for Jesus, that love would carry us through any of life's difficulties. Look with me at the difficulty Peter would face, in which he would need his love for Jesus solidified firmly in his heart, verse 18. ([John 21:18-19](#))

Peter would later be bound, and led to crucifixion because of his testimony for Jesus. The historians of the day wrote that Peter even insisted that he be crucified upside down, because he wasn't worthy of dying in the same manner as did Jesus. It would appear that Jesus' method of forgiveness, relationship healing, restoration worked. It would appear that Peter grew from phileo love of Jesus into agape love for Jesus.

Now this whole conversation could possibly be summarized and concluded by Jesus saying “follow me.” In other words, the gist of the conversation was for Peter to follow Jesus’ way of loving God and loving His people- but it appears this command wasn’t just spiritual in meaning, it was physical as well- Jesus was getting up from the campfire and wanted Peter to follow, to walk with Him. So Peter follows, and this is what happens, verse 20... ([John 21:20-25](#))

I love this. Peter gets up with Jesus, and the other disciples are content to stay seated by the fire and chit chat, but John is like *“I don’t want to miss anything this raise-himself-back-to-life-guy says or does”* and he gets up to follow them. He jumps at the opportunity to get some more Jesus time! I hope that as we grow our love for Jesus, we would be the same. That we would no longer be content just talking about work, play, the ballgame- but that we’d be hungry to hear about and witness how Jesus is interacting with His other followers. So, Peter notices John tagging along behind them. Perhaps he asks about John out of genuine concern for his future, or perhaps he asks about him out of feeling annoyed by the eavesdropping, but judging from Jesus’ response it seems that Peter’s motive in asking about John is rooted in a feeling of something like *“Ok Jesus, you’ve told me of my scary future, is this guy John’s future better or worse than mine?”* It seems Peter was comparing the road he must walk with the road John must walk, and Jesus responded with an answer that basically told Peter not to worry about John’s future.

You see, there’s a difference between *caring* for God’s people and *comparing* with God’s people. You’re not caring for God’s people if you are comparing your road to theirs. You’re not caring for God’s people if you are sizing up their situation in light of your experience and situation. I’m not saying that there isn’t opportunity to teach and share with others from your own experiences with God- no, we definitely need that. We need to hear from each other and share with each other the things we have each learned on our personal journey, but what we don’t need to be doing is comparing our journey with others out of envy for where *they* are in comparison, or with a pat on the back out of pride because of where *we* are in comparison. Follow Jesus, be obedient to Him, walk on the road He has given you- whether it appears easy or difficult in comparison to those around you. Pastor Dave and I’s hope for ourselves and for each of you, is that we each would catch the vision of loving Jesus and tending to His sheep, with a Jesus-like humility and authenticity, void of any envy or pride. May we thoroughly

address our past issues, looking at them through the lens of our present heart affection towards Jesus. And as we engage with each other- sharing each other's burdens, hearing each other's stories, learning from past experiences, witnessing each other's struggles- may we constantly be encouraging each other to more fully love Jesus and His people.