

The King's commission

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- [0 : 00] Do keep the Bible open in front of you to John chapter 21. Let me pray.
Heavenly Father, I just pray that indeed you take the words of John 21 and plant it deep down in us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.
Now have you ever been put in charge of a big project? Perhaps you're in school and you've been asked to oversee a play or a concert for the purposes of charity.
Or perhaps at work you've been given responsibility to come up with various strategies and blueprints for the whole department to improve efficiency. Or perhaps at church you've been asked to organize a big missions conference meant to mobilize and encourage Christians to get into your community.
But the scale of the project simply overwhelms you. You know it's all for a good cause. But you look at the task at hand and you think, oh this is way too big for me.
- [1 : 08] I can't do it. I don't have the right gifts. Who am I? I'm the wrong person. I'm an imposter. And so you delay and you drag your feet and try to put the project out of your mind.
You feel paralyzed. And I suspect that's the experience of many Christians as well. When I was growing up in this very church, right behind me on this wall, there used to be the words of the Great Commission of Matthew chapter 28.
Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And that was a constant reminder to me as to what the church is for.
But the scale of the task can seem overwhelming. Make disciples? Who? Me? But who am I?
I'm nobody. It's way too big. And then, it doesn't help when our minds go back to the past and we think of all the stuff that we're ashamed of.
- [2 : 19] All the times that we have failed God. All the bad things we did. And all the good things that we didn't do. We are paralyzed by guilt.
Now, how many times have I thought on a Saturday night that I can't preach the message on Sunday? Because my message and my life don't match as well as I wish.
And yes, in our heads, we know what the gospel says. That the cross cleanses and justifies. But often they remain just Christian jargon to us, doesn't it?
We feel guilty and inadequate. Not up to the task. And so it stifles our service to God. It stops us from effectively serving Him.
And so we simply go to church and drag our feet. Well, that's kind of where the disciples are at too, particularly Peter. You see, we're right at the end of John's gospel.
- [3 : 23] At the beginning in John chapter 1, we had that famous prologue. All about Jesus, who is the Word made flesh. It's all about God sending His Son into the world as the true light.
And now, right at the end of John's gospel, it's not just about Jesus, but about us.

In John chapter 20, Jesus says, As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And those words also used to be at the back of this hall. And in John 21, down in verses 15 to 17, Jesus tells Peter, Feed my sheep.

Take care of them. At the end of verse 19, He says, Follow me. And so Jesus is now sending His church, us, to serve as His people in His will.

Well, that's the Christian's project. That's the mission. And so how do the disciples react at the beginning of John chapter 21?

[4 : 38] Are they raring to go? Are they feeling all excited and pumped up? Are they saying, Yes, let's go all out for Jesus. Let's be so out for Jesus. Let's give it all up for Him.

Well, no. In verse 3, Peter says instead, Let's go fishing. It's almost like they've gone back to the way their lives were before they ever met Jesus, when they were simply ordinary fishermen trying to earn a living.

Now, I don't think they were necessarily trying to run away from what Jesus asked them to do. A couple of commentators are quite harsh on Peter, with one going so far as to describe him as falling into apostasy.

But Peter and gang were probably just feeling the same way we do when we are given that big project. They want to follow Jesus.

They want to honour their master. But they remember their past. And they feel guilty. They look at the task. And they feel inadequate.

[5 : 55] They're paralysed. And so to clear their heads, they simply default to what they know best. Fishing. And Jesus knows that.

He knows our feelings. He knows our hearts. He knows that even though Peter and the disciples and many of us today truly believe that he is risen.

Well, he knows we still struggle and feel paralysed. He knows that we're still tentative in our discipleship, that we lack strength and vitality, that we're sluggish in living wholeheartedly for him.

And that's why John 21 is in our Bibles today. You would have thought that last week, John 20, verse 31, would have been a good note to end on, with John telling us the purpose of his gospel.

These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name. But because Jesus is the good shepherd who knows what his sheep are like, he tenderly endures before he goes that Peter is equipped to keep believing and to keep running the race.

[7 : 20] He recommissions him. And this morning, that's what he wants to do for us. How can we keep from being paralysed from serving Jesus?

Well, here's how John 21 will answer. The love of Jesus will fill our service to Jesus. The love of Jesus will fill our service to Jesus.

We will serve best when we most profoundly love Jesus. And we will most profoundly love Jesus when we are deeply convinced in the very core of our being that he loves us first.

And so let's take a look at the first half of today's passage where we will find and meditate on the deep, deep love of Jesus.

And I just want to point out three different ways that love of Jesus is shown to us. Notice, first of all, that he shows grace to the undeserving.

[8 : 29] This fishing episode is found in verses 1 to 14. And notice how it begins and ends. Verse 1. Afterwards, Jesus appeared again to his disciples.

And then down in verse 14. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. Now, we know that he's revealed himself already prior to this episode.

Last week, he appeared to his frightened friends in the locker room. And then he appeared to Thomas. Why? To show that it's true he's really risen from the dead.

But now, John tells us that he reveals himself again, a third time. Why? So that we know what kind of risen Lord we serve.

Because, let's think for a moment, who he's personally revealing himself to. These are the people. Verse 2. Simon Peter, Thomas, also known as Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

[9 : 47] Familiar names, but let's not be too quick to rush over this list. Think about them. There's Simon Peter.

Now, this is the guy who way back in John 13 asked Jesus, Lord, where are you going? And Jesus says, I'm going to a place where you cannot go. But Peter boldly declares, oh, Lord, I'm going to lay down my life for you.

But then we fast forward to John 18 and we discover Peter cowering before a servant girl, furiously denying that he knows Jesus in any way.

We find him keeping company with people who don't know Jesus. And we find him telling them confidently two more times, nope, don't know Jesus either, just like you guys.

Never followed him. so much for laying down his life. And then there's the next name, Thomas.

[10 : 53] It doesn't inspire confidence either. After all, if Peter denied Jesus before the crucifixion, Thomas doubted Jesus after the resurrection.

show me before I believe, he says. Now, last week, I mentioned the positive side of Thomas' request.

On one level, asking for a sign is a good thing since he should fact check. And yet, there's also a negative side, isn't there? There's something about his demand for a sign that echoes the way the crowds used to sinfully demand a sign from Jesus.

And so now we have one who denies, another who doubted and demanded. And then there's Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee.

Now, we haven't heard from him for a while, but do you remember where we first met him? Way back in John chapter one. Jesus has just begun his ministry and Philip runs to Nathaniel and tells him, guess what?

[12 : 12] We have found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about. It's Jesus of Nazareth. And Nathaniel replies to him, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

It's not the most ringing endorsement, is it? I'm sure if you've ever undertaken a huge project, you're hoping that your friends would support you fully and it would hurt within it if you are truly the real deal, but your friends don't think you are.

And so these are Jesus' disciples, people who deny him, who doubt him, who disparage him. these are not the sort of people you want on your team.

Now put yourself in Jesus' shoes. What would you do? The world would tell Jesus, cut such people out of your life.

You did good for them and see what they did to you? You deserve it. Be good to yourself for once. Being a good person doesn't mean you have to put up with other people's crap.

[13 : 30] These people are toxic. Get away from them. But thankfully Jesus doesn't. He's died, he's risen, he's proven himself, and maybe he could have surrounded himself with a more worthy group of people.

But who does he appear to? who does he make himself known to? The one who denied him, the one who doubted him, the one who disparaged him.

And that is good news. Because if he did what the world asked him to, he would cut himself from us too.

For who amongst us have not pretended that Jesus is not really that important to us one time or another? Who amongst us have not experienced a time where we should have stood up for Jesus as a Christian and we didn't?

And who amongst us have not thought at one time or another that Jesus isn't really all that good or worth giving up everything for or really all that significant?

[14 : 48] God, well, we are all undeserving. In our most honest moments, we know it. Maybe we've just screamed at our children and now we're haunted by the sense that we're bad parents who can't bring up our kids in the ways of the Lord.

Maybe on our way to church this morning, we've actually had a quarrel with our husband or wife in the car. Maybe we've messed up our relationships at work and now we're depressed that we're bad employees or employers who can't shine much in the world.

Maybe we're just so slow to understand what the pastor is teaching or what the Bible passage is saying and we feel like stupid church members who just don't get it. And because we know we're undeserving, we're pretty sure that God won't come close to us.

He won't draw near. Why would he? We constantly mess up. And so we're paralyzed. And our burdens stop us serving him.

Instead, we decide that it's better to just distract ourselves. The disciples go fishing. That might not be our thing, but we might instead choose to get lost in movies and computer games, or endlessly reading the news and watching videos, or whatever floats your boat.

[16 : 14] Anything to forget this living for Jesus stuff for a while. For we think, if we try it, we'll just feel condemned because we don't measure up.

So let's not even try. But stop. Look. See. The disciples in verse 4 did not realize that it was Jesus.

But there he is, standing on the shore. And maybe you don't see him either. In your mind, you have a mental picture of Jesus as a constantly scolding boss, or a goody two shoes who makes you feel bad by comparison.

And so you don't see the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus of John 21. But Jesus is right there all along ready to extend his hand of grace even to undeserving people like us.

After all, he loves the ungodly. He went to the cross for them. And he doesn't stop there, but now he comes to Peter and Thomas and us.

[17 : 34] And that's not all he does. Here's how he also loves us. Second of all, there's provision for the repentant.

There's provision for the repentant. The disciples go out to fish at night, but they catch nothing. And then Jesus comes, although they don't recognize him, and he advises them, verse 6, to throw the net onto the right side of the boat.

This they did. And verse 6 tells us they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Verse 11 tells us that it's 153 big ones.

Now, Christians throughout history have tried to assign all sorts of elaborate symbolic meanings to the number 153. One guy in the 4th century, for example, suggested that there were 153 different species of fish, citing the fish expert of his time.

And so this catch symbolically showed that the church was going to draw in all kinds of people. Others talk about 1 plus 5 plus 3 to mean this or that.

[18 : 52] But I think it all doesn't quite work. Rather, I think it's 153 because that's the number they caught. And there is some symbolism in there, but it's simpler.

John simply wants to highlight the abundance of Jesus' provision. It's quite something after all to go from 0 to 153.

And that's not all Jesus did. He didn't just help them catch fish. He cooked them a meal. Now, details are important in this episode.

Notice verse 9, that he's giving them fish and bread. Now, immediately, that should remind the disciples of that great miracle back in John chapter 6, where Jesus takes five small fish and two small loaves of bread and feeds a great multitude with some left over.

And again, there's abundance. And straight after performing that miracle, he teaches. He tells those listening that he is the bread of life, and those who feed on him shall never go hungry or thirsty.

[20 : 16] Jesus is telling his disciples here, as he prepares fish and bread for them again, I know you think that you're thoroughly unable to face the mission that I'm sending you on.

But know this, I will provide for you. I'll provide all that you need to do the work that I'm sending you on. I love you.

So let me feed you. Let me give you what you need. Come and have breakfast. And like I said, details matter.

As Peter comes near, not only does he see fish and bread, but verse 9, a charcoal fire. Now, when was the last time a fire was mentioned in John's Gospel?

It was way back in John chapter 18 when Peter warmed himself over a charcoal fire, even as he denied Jesus.

[21 : 23] And now, over a charcoal fire, Jesus invites him to breakfast and feeds him. Imagine again that you're in Jesus' shoes.

Now, you might grudgingly accept somebody who's done wrong to you, but will you go out of your way to have laksa with him? To pay for his meal?

To do good to him where you can? Well, that's Jesus. This is who we serve. And he cares about us down to the very last detail.

Notice that in verse 11, the net is not torn. Now, perhaps that's another indication of Jesus' love. In performing this miracle for them, he makes sure that their equipment is still okay, even though the catch is so great that the nets would usually break.

Small details like that matter to him. He loves us greatly. Well, it's hard to believe that this is our God, isn't it?

[22 : 37] Well, look at the disciples in verse 7 and 12. John cries, it is the Lord. Verse 12 says, they knew it was the Lord.

Peter, in typical fashion, leads the way by jumping into the water and swimming after him. And yet, once on shore, they don't quite dare approach him and converse with him directly.

Because it's almost too good to be true. Well, that's us, isn't it? We know in theory that this is God, but we dare not quite believe it.

We want to turn to him, but we don't quite dare to put our entire lives, our entire selves into his hands. And so we give him only pieces of it.

Because we can't quite bring ourselves to trust that this is who he is. And yet, this is the gospel we believe in.

[23 : 42] The gospel in one word is Jesus. And this is Jesus, the one who died on the cross in our place and forgave our sin.

This is Jesus, who rose again to be our king, whom we must listen to. This is Jesus, our king who is good and gracious, accepting of the undeserving, who come to him in repentance.

This is Jesus, who provides and feeds us to strengthen us. And if this is Jesus, we don't need to be paralyzed.

For we can be sure that he is all good all the time as we live our entire lives for him.

the gospel itself is our cure. There's a line in the song In Christ Alone that says, no guilt in life, no fear in death.

[24 : 49] And if last week John chapter 20 helps us see the latter, no fear in death, well this week John 21 helps us see the former, no guilt in life.

Jesus gives grace to the undeserving and provides for the repentant. And that brings us to the third way that Jesus shows his love.

Third of all, he qualifies the disqualified. He qualifies the disqualified. Now as Peter sees all this happening before his very eyes, he must be a reborn man.

He's been broken by his own betrayal. But now Jesus is putting him back together again. But there is one more thing that Jesus does for him.

Verse 15. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than this?

[25 : 50] Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my lambs. Again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you 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 Jesus asked him a third time, do you love me?

He said, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. Three times, Jesus asked him, do you love me?

love me? For just as Peter disowned Jesus three times, and so now Jesus gives him three opportunities to declare his love.

It's a public reinstatement. It's a recommissioning. It's putting him back together again. There's no trace of self-righteousness on Peter's part.

[26 : 52] He knows that Jesus knows what's in him anyway. But he loves Jesus. How could he not love the one who is willing to have breakfast with the broken?

Notice that's how Peter is able to get on with the job that he's been tasked with. Jesus didn't ask him, do you love my sheep?

No, he asked Peter, do you love me? He didn't ask, do you get busy for me? No, he asked Peter, do you love me?

For how can Peter best love God's people? How can Peter best serve the Lord? It's when he loves Jesus. Jesus didn't ask about his skills, or his theological qualifications, or even his contingency plans to prevent his failure a second time.

No, he asked, do you love me? If you know Jesus superficially, you will only love him superficially.

[28 : 06] But if you know Jesus deeply, you will love him deeply, and that would result in deep service to him. The love of Jesus fills our service to Jesus.

So my friends, when you see Jesus and turn to him, this is what happens. He qualifies you, because he has a job for you.

And God doesn't need you to have a sinless past, or a resume that's white as snow, or a squeaky clean background to use you. And he wants to use you.

The whole point of Jesus reinstating Peter is so that Peter can go into action. The time to be paralysed is over.

The time for serving him is now. And let's finish today by looking from the rest of today's passage. What loving service of Jesus means here?

[29 : 16] What does it mean to serve him? How do we actually show love to Jesus? Well, I think it's summarized for us at the end of verse 19.

Follow me. Follow me. And so we love as Jesus loves. We do good as Jesus does good. We forgive as Jesus forgives.

We confront as Jesus confronts. and we serve as Jesus serves. All for the sake of others. All for the glory of God. Loving Jesus for every single Christian means following him.

To put it in reverse, not following Jesus might be an indication we don't love him. love him. But notice that for Peter, loving Jesus will actually show itself in a very specific task.

Do you love me? Jesus asks. Yes, Peter replies. So feed my sheep, Jesus says. Just as I have fed you, feed my people.

[30 : 36] And in John's gospel, feeding the sheep means feeding and equipping them all of God's word. And if Peter does that, it will ultimately lead God's people back to the feed of Jesus.

As Jesus himself said earlier in John chapter 5, the whole scriptures testify about him. And so to feed and take care of the sheep is to show Jesus, the true Jesus to them, the one who displays immense grace and patience and kindness, whether that's done in personal ministry in one-to-ones or through the pulpit, as I'm trying to do right now.

And so what does that mean for us? Well, firstly, there's a specific application for people like Peter, who serve as shepherds. Well, whatever else he does, the pastor must be a preacher of God's word.

He must feed the sheep. It's a task that cannot be neglected. And it's how he loves Jesus and looks after what belongs to God.

And so that means a church wanting to be faithful to Jesus must only appoint pastors who will feed you, not staff you. or give you poison.

[32 : 02] A church wanting to be faithful to Jesus must ensure their pastors have time and space to be able to feed God's people. And that would be of great benefit to the churches themselves because they will be led back to Jesus and his love.

But most of us here are not pastors, so how else does this apply to us? Well, here's how. if Jesus thinks this is a priority, then we must make it a priority to actually feed on that teaching ourselves.

We love Jesus as we begin to cultivate an appetite to hear the Bible itself taught. We love Jesus as we digest that spiritual food so that its nutrients are in our bloodstream rather than vomited out afterwards.

A love is for Jesus. It's not so much about being busy for Jesus, but a desire to hear his words. Is that your posture every Sunday at church?

Or every Friday at your home fellowship group Bible studies? Or every time there's just another opportunity advertised to go deeper into God's word? And notice that's John's hope for us too.

[33 : 23] In verse 24, he tells us that he has testified to Jesus by writing these words down. And he wants us to accept his testimony as something true, not something to ignore.

And so let's eat. Let's feed. Amongst those of us who are a little younger, I wonder if the discipline of the quiet time that is spending time in God's word and praying is vanishing a little bit.

Now the Bible doesn't say that having quiet times is compulsory, but it does want us to feed on God's word. And so it's worth asking, how are we doing that?

And let's feed each other with this spiritual food whenever we can. In the Old Testament, in Malachi chapter 3 verse 16, God's people discuss God's word with each other.

In the New Testament, in Romans chapter 15 verse 14, the Roman Christians are able to instruct one another with God's word. It's not the job of the pastor alone.

[34 : 37] I've been reading this week of churches in the 17th century, where it was typical for Christians to use their Sundays to discuss the sermon that they've heard, check up on how each other are doing spiritually, and refresh each other with God's word.

Now, that's a great practice. Just imagine a church where people want to help each other to love Jesus more by looking and talking about scripture together in a way where we are mutually encouraged to look to Jesus.

Think about how if we do that regularly, that would impact the world. And we need to recognize that following Jesus means following the way of the cross.

Loving Jesus means loving the cross. And that means it will be costly. For Peter, it meant literally dying the way Jesus did.

Look at verse 18. Jesus says to him, very truly I tell you, 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.

[35 : 52] Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. He will stretch out his hands by also being crucified on the cross.

A prophecy that seems to have come true based on the testimony of the early church fathers. And that sounds scary. Some of you might have read the story this week where the children in one of the churches in Sri Lanka that was bombed were asked at Sunday school, are you willing to die for Jesus?

And they all said yes. And less than half an hour later, they live that reality. Serving Jesus is unto death.

And that's scary. But remember, this Jesus provides, this Jesus qualifies. Our journeys of discipleship will look different.

That's the point of verses 21 to 23, which I won't have time to look at today. But whatever journey Jesus has us on, he's there. And so I want to end today by making sure we all ask ourselves, do you love Jesus?

[37 : 09] Do you love Jesus? It would be a shame to walk out of Sunday service this morning without addressing that question. It would be a shame if we go out to eat refreshments after this and avoid even thinking about it.

Instead, let me encourage you to discuss today's sermon with your spouse or with a trusted friend later on. Do you love Jesus? And if you love Jesus, you will follow him to the end.

You won't be paralyzed because you know of his love for you. Do you love Jesus?

I do not do you love to