

Grace for Sinners Like Us

Text: John 21:15-25

Introduction: I want you to think for a minute about your lowest moment as a follower of Jesus. None of us are perfect. All of us have failed Him. I'm not so much talking about a time when you rebelled against God prior to coming to faith in Jesus. I'm talking about a time when you failed Jesus as one of His followers. Perhaps there's something that comes to your mind. Maybe it's something that became a very public sin. Maybe it's something that no one else knows even to this day.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, as Jesus and His disciples were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem, Peter asked Jesus a question: "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." Peter responded, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." To which Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Those words surely would have been hard for Peter to hear had he imagined that what Jesus was saying was even possible. Denying Jesus was the furthest thing from Peter's mind. In Peter's mind, he was willing to lay down his life for Jesus. There was no way that he would deny the Lord Jesus.

But as you know, that is exactly what happened. Jesus was arrested and tried in the dark of night. Peter followed along behind, which was commendable because, besides John, all the other disciples had scattered. But when Peter was asked to give testimony of his relationship with Jesus, he denied being a disciple of Jesus. Not once. Not twice. But three times. Just as Jesus said that he would.

But that was not the end of Peter's story. After the resurrection, Peter was one of the first of the disciples to see the empty tomb. He was with the disciples when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

And as we saw last week, when Peter realized that the resurrected Lord Jesus was standing on the shore near where he and the other disciples were fishing, Peter jumped out of the boat and hurried to shore to be with Jesus.

Which is where we pick up the story this morning. Peter and the other disciples are there with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee. The Bible tells us that Jesus had prepared a breakfast of fish and bread for His disciples. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated His tender care for them. But now that they've finished breakfast, something very significant takes place between Jesus and Peter.

We've been making our way through the latter part of John's Gospel. We started in the Farewell Discourse beginning in chapter 13. We've seen the arrest and trial of Jesus. We've found hope in the crucifixion of Jesus. We've rejoiced in the resurrection of Jesus. And now we come to the closing narrative of John's Gospel, found in chapter 21.

Go ahead and turn there in your Bible if you haven't already. We preach the Bible here at Goshen. If you want to follow along with the sermon, the best way to do so is with your Bible open and on your lap. We're in chapter 21. I'll be reading verse 15 through the end of the chapter and book in verse 25.

(Read John 21:15-25...Pray)

Goshen family, as followers of Jesus, we need grace. Peter needed grace. And we do too. Peter's story reminds us that...

I. We need grace to be forgiven of our sin against Jesus (John 21:15-17).

A. Let's be clear about the grievous nature of Peter's sin.

- 1. Despite insisting that he was willing to die for Jesus, when push came to shove, Peter denied Jesus three times.**
- 2. Peter had been a follower of Jesus for three years. He had heard the powerful teaching of Jesus. He had witnessed the amazing miracles of Jesus. Yet, when Jesus needed him most, Peter denied Jesus three times.**

3. Peter had been the one to declare to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In response, Jesus called Peter blessed. He said that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him but God the Father in heaven. Jesus said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:17-19). But then as Jesus was on trial before the Jewish religious leaders, Peter denied Him three times.
 4. This was a serious offense because Jesus said, “Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:33).
 5. Peter understood the grievous nature of his sin because Matthew tells us that after Peter heard the rooster crow, he remembered what Jesus had said, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” Matthew writes that Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matt. 26:75).
 6. You can imagine the failure that Peter must have felt. Perhaps to some extent you can relate to the failure Peter must have felt. At the beginning of the sermon, I asked you to think about your lowest moment as a follower of Jesus. We’re not unlike Peter. We too have sinned against the Lord Jesus in grievous ways.
 7. Which makes Jesus’ interaction with Peter here at the end of John’s Gospel so relevant for us.
- B. John tells us that three times Jesus questioned Peter concerning his love for Jesus.**
1. We see the first time Jesus questioned Peter’s love for Him in verse 15.
 - a. John writes... (Read vs. 15a)
 - b. Peter answered, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (vs. 15b).
 - c. Jesus responded, “Feed my lambs” (vs. 15c).
 2. Then Jesus questioned Peter a second time (vs. 16).
 - a. Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asked (vs. 16a).
 - b. Peter answered again, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (vs. 16b).
 - c. Jesus responded, “Tend my sheep” (vs. 16c).
 3. Then a third time, Jesus questioned Peter (vs. 17).
 - a. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (vs. 17a).
 - b. John makes an editorial note to tell us that Peter was grieved because Jesus had essentially questioned his love for Jesus three times (vs. 17b).
 - c. But Peter responded, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (vs. 17c).
 - d. Jesus simply said, “Feed my sheep” (vs. 17d).
 4. For some, the key to interpreting these three questions and the answers that Peter gives is found in the different Greek words that John uses for love.
 - a. In the first two questions, John uses a verb form of the Greek word *agape*. “Do you *agape* me?” Jesus asked. This is said to refer to the highest form of love, a divine love that involves the whole will.
 - b. Peter answered using a verb form of the Greek word *phileo*, which refers to a lower form of love, involving affection and friendship. “Yes, Lord; you know that I *phileo* you.”
 - c. The idea is that Peter was too embarrassed by his sin to claim the higher form of love for Jesus. So instead, he claimed only the lower form of love.
 - d. Then in His third question, Jesus lowered His demand from *agape* to *phileo*, which shows that Jesus was willing to meet Peter where he was in the moment, knowing that Peter’s love and devotion for Him would increase again with time.
 - e. That all sounds good, and it will certainly preach, but I’m not convinced that the difference between *agape* and *phileo* is the key to interpreting Jesus’ conversation with Peter here.

- f. First off, the conversation likely would have taken place in Aramaic rather than Greek. So, John is not recording the actual exact words of Jesus and Peter. He's providing in Greek a summary of a conversation that likely took place in Aramaic.
- g. Also, we know that John tends to vary his vocabulary for stylistic reasons. He does the same thing with the instruction to feed my lambs or sheep. In verse 15, John records Jesus as saying, "Feed my lambs." Then in verse 16, he records Jesus as saying, "Tend my sheep." The idea is the same, but John uses different words to provide variety for stylistic reasons.

C. So, if the key to understanding this conversation between Jesus and Peter is not in the difference between *agape* and *phileo*, how should we understand this interaction?

1. First, notice the way that Jesus asks the first question. He doesn't simply ask Peter if he loves Him. He asks, "Do you love me MORE THAN THESE?" (vs. 15a).
 - a. Who are THESE? Jesus is talking about the other disciples. He is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus.
 - b. Before his denial, you can imagine Peter saying, "Yes! Of course, I love you more than they do, Jesus!"
 - c. Matthew records Peter saying something similar when Jesus predicted his denial in Matthew 26. Peter said, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."
 - d. But things are different now, aren't they? Peter had fallen away. Peter has eaten a big old heaping slice of humble pie.
 - e. So, Peter simply says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you" (vs. 15b).
2. Notice also that Jesus asks three times what is essentially the same question.

- a. How many times did Peter deny Jesus? He denied Jesus three times. How many times did Jesus ask Peter if he loved Him? Three times. That's no coincidence.
 - b. In fact, there's another detail that I want you to note. In John 18 where Peter denied Jesus, we see that Peter was warming himself by a charcoal fire. And now in chapter 21, we see in verse 9 that it was a charcoal fire that Jesus had lit on the beach. You know that charcoal has a distinct smell when it is burning. The smell of the charcoal burning on this occasion would have likely reminded Peter of the charcoal fire he was standing by to warm himself when he denied Jesus for the third time. There's only two times in the New Testament that we see a charcoal fire. Once at Peter's denial of Jesus. And then again at Peter's restoration. That's not by accident.
 - c. Jesus doesn't shy away from Peter's denial. He doesn't sweep it under the rug. He doesn't ignore it. Instead, He forces Peter to face it head on.
 - d. Richard Phillips writes, "By inquiring about Peter's love three times, Jesus was not rubbing salt in his wounds but doing the serious work of bringing his disciple to a true repentance" (Phillips, 706).
 - e. This was undoubtedly painful for Peter. But it was necessary pain. Pain that was needed for true repentance. Pain that allowed Peter to experience the grace he needed to be forgiven of his sin against Jesus.
3. Brothers and sisters, when we sin against Jesus, we must not run from the pain of our sin. We have to press into it. Just like Jesus forced Peter to press into his pain on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias.
 - a. I think about King David's sin against Bathsheba in 2 Samuel.
 - b. But I think also about his prayer of repentance in Psalm 51.

- c. David prayed, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:3-4a).
- d. Because David confessed his sin to God, he was able to cry out, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).
- e. We can’t run from our sin. We have to press into it. We have to confess it to God. Because that’s when we can receive the grace we need to be forgiven of our sin against Jesus.
- f. John would later write in his first epistle, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).
- g. John could write that because he had experienced it in his own life but also because he had seen it in Peter’s life.

Goshen family, we need grace to be forgiven of our sin against Jesus.

II. We need grace to be commissioned to ministry for Jesus (John 21:15-17).

A. Just as Jesus called Peter to repentance by three times questioning his love for Him, He restores Peter with three commissions to ministry.

- 1. After Peter says the first time, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs” (vs. 15c).
- 2. Then after Peter confesses his love for Jesus a second time, Jesus says, “Tend my sheep” (vs. 16c).
- 3. And then again after the third confession of Peter’s love for Jesus, Jesus says, “Feed my sheep” (vs. 17d).
- 4. Do you see the significance of what Jesus is doing here? He doesn’t say to Peter, “Okay, Peter, you are forgiven. But I can no longer use you in ministry again.”
- 5. Instead, we know that Peter was the one God would use to preach the gospel on the Day of Pentecost when 3,000 people repented of their sin and placed their faith in Jesus (Acts 2).

- 6. Peter is the one who said to the lame beggar in Acts 3, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (Acts 3:6).
- 7. Peter is the one God used to preach the message of the gospel to Cornelius and the Gentiles (Acts 10).
- 8. Peter is the one God used to write two books of our New Testament: 1 and 2 Peter.
- 9. Following his restoration on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, God used Peter in tremendous ways in ministry for Jesus.
- 10. So, what makes you think that God can’t use you? Maybe you think God can’t use you because of some perceived limitation in your gifting. Maybe it’s because, like Peter, you’ve sinned against Jesus in some grievous way.
- 11. Whatever it is, I’m here to tell you this morning that just like Peter needed and received grace to be commissioned to ministry for Jesus, you and I need and can receive that same grace.

B. There’s a couple things that I want you to notice about Jesus’ call on Peter’s life.

- 1. The first is that Jesus says to Peter, “Feed MY lambs,” “Tend MY sheep,” and Feed MY sheep.”
 - a. The point is that the sheep belong to Jesus.
 - b. Peter would clearly learn this truth because when writing his first epistle, he exhorts elders to “shepherd the FLOCK of GOD” (1 Pet. 5:2). Peter came to understand that the sheep belong to Jesus. Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. Those who serve Christ’s church as elders are merely under shepherds.
 - c. Goshen Baptist Church is not my church. Nor is it your church. It’s God’s church. Goshen Baptist Church belongs to God. As the Psalmist wrote, “We are His people and the sheep of His pasture” (Ps. 100:3).

- d. So, let's remember that any opportunity for ministry that the Lord gives to us is an act of His grace. Our ministry doesn't belong to us. It's God's ministry. He has entrusted it to us for a time as a steward.
2. The second thing I want you to notice is the verbs "feed," "tend," and again "feed."
- a. I don't think John intends for us to distinguish between "feed" and "tend" as if these are two different instructions from Jesus.
 - b. Rather, together they describe both the pastoral task and the work of ministry in general. The primary work of ministry in Christ's church is to feed the flock of Christ. And how are Christ's sheep fed? Through the faithful, clear preaching and teaching of the Word of God.
 - c. Our ministry for Jesus is a Word-based ministry. This obviously starts with the preaching ministry on Sunday mornings. But it doesn't end there. It continues in our Sunday School classes and other small group Bible studies. It continues in one-on-one discipleship and mentoring relationships among God's people. It extends to our youth and children's ministries.
 - d. We want everything we do at Goshen to be centered around the Word of God because Christ's sheep need to be fed. It's the ministry to which Jesus called Peter, and it's the ministry He has called us to as well.

And we need grace to be commissioned to ministry for Jesus.

III. We need grace to be willing to suffer for Jesus (John 21:18-19).

A. Look at what Jesus tells Peter in verse 18. (Read vs. 18)

- 1. This could be taken in two different ways.

- a. On the one hand, we could understand Jesus to be merely making a statement about the natural progression of life. When you're young, you can dress yourself, go where you want, and do what you want. When you get older, you inevitably become limited and may even need help with the most basic functions of life.
- b. Or we could understand Jesus to be telling Peter about the suffering he is going to experience in his life and death as he follows Jesus.

2. We know we should understand it the second way because of John's editorial note in verse 19. (Read vs. 19)

- a. In fact, by the time John wrote his Gospel, Peter would have already been dead. Tradition tells us that like his Lord, Peter died by crucifixion, perhaps even upside down.
- b. He did in fact "stretch out [his] hands" and die. He did follow Jesus.
- c. You'll remember that Jesus had told Peter, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." And follow Jesus he did.

B. Peter would soon understand what it was like to be persecuted and suffer for Jesus' sake.

- 1. We know he was arrested and thrown into prison in Acts 3. And then again in Acts 5.
- 2. As was read for us in our Scripture reading this morning, Peter would later write, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12).
- 3. Peter understood that suffering is part of the Christian life. It's part of the call to follow Jesus.

And we need grace to be willing to suffer for Jesus.

IV. We need grace to accept God's good plan for us in Jesus (John 21:20-23).

A. John tells us that Peter then turned his attention to John. (Read vs. 20-21)

1. Peter wants to know, "If this is what is going to happen to me, that I am going to have to follow you all the way to death, what about him?"
2. You can understand the question. It's not unlike the question I get asked almost every night at bedtime. Alright boys, it's time for bed. But what about Addie? You let me worry about her. You worry about yourself. That's a full-time job.
3. That's basically what Jesus says to Peter, isn't it? Look at verse 22. (Read vs. 22)
 - a. Peter, you worry about you. That's a full-time job. I'll worry about John. What happens to John is really none of your business. You follow me!
 - b. John's note in verse 23 is interesting. (Read vs. 23)
 - c. Apparently both because of what Jesus said and because John lived a long life, some had said that John was not to die. But that's not what Jesus said. He didn't say that John wasn't going to die. Just that it wasn't any of Peter's business when, how, or even whether John would die.

B. Are you ever tempted to become distracted from following Jesus yourself by looking at the lives of other Christians and focusing too much on what God is doing in their lives?

1. That's what we see with Peter here at the end of John 21.
2. Sometimes we're distracted by the amazing ways that God seems to be at work in the life of someone else. This temptation is particularly real for pastors and others in vocational ministry. Look at what God is doing in that church. Or look at that youth group or that children's ministry. Or look at how fruitful that missionary is. We can easily become jealous of the ways that God is working in and through others around us.

3. Or sometimes when we're walking through suffering, we can become frustrated because it doesn't seem like anyone else has to suffer like we do. Why me? Why do I have to walk through this, Lord? What about him? What about her?
4. And Jesus says to you this morning, "What is that to you? You follow me!"
5. You should know that however difficult it may be, God has a good plan for you in Jesus.

But we need grace to accept God's good plan for us in Jesus, don't we?

V. We need grace to trust all that the Bible says about Jesus (John 21:24-25).

A. We already saw at the end of chapter 20 that John is writing so that his readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in His name.

1. Now John emphasizes the authenticity of his message. (Read vs. 24)
2. Perhaps some of what John writes about in his Gospel seems hard to believe. But he is bearing witness about things he has witnessed himself with his own eyes.
3. He clearly affirms that his testimony is true. Now, a self-affirmation doesn't necessarily settle the matter. But it's not unimportant either.
 - a. When someone takes the witness stand in a court of law, they are required to swear an oath to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."
 - b. The truth is that we trust the writings of historians all the time. We don't question whether the events they tell us about actually happened. We trust that they did unless there is evidence otherwise.
 - c. In the case of the Gospels, we have four of them that each bear witness to the life and ministry of Jesus in different ways but with one unifying message that Jesus is the Son of God who came to take away the sin of the world.

4. John has not written an exhaustive account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Nor have the other Gospel writers. But they each highlight certain things from His life and ministry that bear witness to the truth about who He is. (Read vs. 25)

B. The real question is what you will do with the Jesus who is revealed in this book.

- 1. Do you believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God?**
- 2. Have you received the abundant and eternal life that is only available through Him?**

We need grace to trust all that the Bible says about Jesus.

Conclusion: As followers of Jesus, we need grace. Just like Peter needed grace, we need grace.

- We need grace to be forgiven of our sin against Jesus.
- We need grace to be commissioned to ministry for Jesus.
- We need grace to be willing to suffer for Jesus.
- We need grace to accept God's good plan for us in Jesus.
- We need grace to trust all that the Bible says about Jesus.

May we look to Jesus and follow Him. And may He give us the grace we need.