



# WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT

**Sunday 20 August 2023**

The greatest privilege of my role as site pastor is to know you all – and that’s what I’ve been trying to do this year. To hear your stories, understand who you are and what makes you tick. I think I have the best job in the world, because you guys are the best. I have been so impressed this year by how mature and faithful you are. Things are tough and you cling to Jesus. Things are tough and you still show generosity and love to the people around you. So it is an honour to get to know you more.

What I have a deep appreciation of is that it has been and continues to be a tough season for many of us. It has been a tough season for me too. I’m loving our Being God’s People series, and I’ve been really loving exploring together what it means to be God’s people, and how he expects us to live as his people in all of our life – our work, our relationships, our sexuality – all of who we are and what we do comes under the authority of Jesus. I have tried to hammer grace AND truth in this series. I have tried my hardest not to shy away from how we are called to live while reminding us of the grace that both empowers us to live that way and shows mercy and forgiveness when we don’t. I certainly hope that’s what you’ve experienced and heard from this series.

Every week has been focused on how we live – because how we live is important. But I want to kind of pause things for a week. As I tried to prep my sermon this week, I just couldn’t find peace. Partly because this has been a tough week for quite a few of you, and that makes it a tough week for me as your Pastor. I also couldn’t find peace because I worry that no matter how much I emphasise that there is grace, a series like this can still be heavy.

I really want you to walk away from this preaching series with the clear take away that how

you live matters. That your behaviour is important. But I never – I NEVER – want us to forget that there is something that matters more than our behaviour – there is something that is more important than how we live. Who am I and what I am like is important – but who God is and what he is like is the most important thing!

And so partly because I think it's a good time in this series to pause and be reminded of this, and partly because I am so conscious of how tough things are for some of us, we're just going to come back to the most important question today: *Who is God and what is He like?*

Ultimately the Bible tells us that we find the answer to this question by looking at Jesus. We read in Hebrews 1:3: *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being..."* The Apostle Paul writes a very similar thing in Colossians 1:15; he says, *"The Son is the image of the invisible God"*. Jesus Himself says the same thing in John 14:9: *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."*

This is a clear and consistent message. We do not need to be confused about what God is like. We don't need to wonder. Jesus is the clearest picture of God that we have ever received. And we have four books of the Bible devoted to Jesus's life: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Four biographies to reveal to us what Jesus is like, which in turn shows us what God is like.

These stories about Jesus speak into all of our stories – they speak to all of the different ways that life can weigh us down. These stories remind us that Jesus can bring healing and comfort, that He is present in difficult times, that He sees through our bad reputations and can help us carry the weight of life.

But today, I wanted to pick just one story – one of my favourite stories. A story which speaks to those of us that are weighed down by guilt, shame, regret, remorse – the memory of what we've done or not done in the past. I would be surprised if that's not all of us. I want to remind us today that in Jesus, we are not defined by our worst day – we're defined by Jesus. I am so thankful – so thankful – that I am not defined by my worst day, or any of my top 100 worst days, or any recent bad day.

I want to pray that the Holy Spirit would open our eyes and our minds and our hearts to see Jesus clearly through this story. I think we need refreshing, and I hope that coming back to Jesus this morning can bring us some of the refreshing that we need.

If you have your Bible with you, open up to John 21 and we're going to read the last story that John gives us about Jesus's life. We're going to read John 21:1-17. It's a bit of a long story but we're going to read it in full – we're also going to dip into two other stories that give us the background to this story. So a decent amount of reading upfront – but I think it's worth it! In this story, Jesus's disciples have gone back up north to Galilee and they're fishing. Jesus

standing on the shore, but they don't know it's Him.

*Read John 21.*

This story comes after Jesus's death and resurrection. Jesus died at Passover, on the Friday, and the disciples found his tomb empty on Sunday morning. The greatest day in history. After this, the risen Jesus came and spent time with His disciples on two occasions in John's gospel and this is the third and last time within John's biography.

Most importantly for us today, this story occurs in the aftermath of what I could only guess is the lowest point and deepest regret of Peter's life. As many of us would know, the night before Jesus died, Peter denied Jesus to protect himself. I just want to take us back to that story because the two stories go so deeply hand-in-hand.

We first need to jump back to John 13 and then John 18 to get the full story. John 13 records the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It starts to get intense when Jesus predicts that Judas will betray Him, and Judas leaves the room. Then I want to pick up the story from verse 33, which is the next paragraph. Jesus says to the group that He has to leave and that they won't be able to come with Him. Let's pick up the story.

*Read John 13.*

Peter is so full of confidence – so adamant that he would be willing to die for Jesus. Which is what makes the events of later that night so devastating for Peter. If we jump ahead to John 18, we can read this. This is taking place now immediately after Jesus is arrested.

*Read John 18.*

Can you imagine how Peter felt in this moment? I know you can because we've all felt it. The immediate sick in the guts. The way the regret would eat at you for the coming days. The immense guilt. The deep shame. This is one of those moments that we'd all love the chance to do over – but we never get that chance, do we?

That's what makes this story from John 21 so amazing.

Without this background, we can't glimpse the immense love, gentleness, grace and forgiveness of Jesus towards Peter. And we are all Peter. All of us. We're all worried we will be defined by our worst moments. In some ways, we define ourselves internally by our worst moments. That's what shame does.

Peter was meant to have this bright future. Jesus said He was going to build the church on Peter. And then Peter did this. He would have to have imagined that he was disqualified

from that calling now – that Jesus wouldn't have wanted to have anything to do with him. I suspect that's why we find Peter back in his home town of Galilee, 150km from Jerusalem, back in his old fishing boat, doing his old work, assuming that he'd completely blown it.

And yet Jesus still provides yet another miraculous catch. Jesus still eats another meal with Peter. And then Jesus pulls Peter aside and makes things right between the two of them. Jesus didn't overlook the sin, but He restored the friendship, He ate with him, He hung out, and then He gently addressed the elephant in the room. And Peter is the last person Jesus spends time with and speaks to in John's gospel. Isn't that outrageously gracious!

I want to zoom right in on parts of the conversation that the two of them have. And then I want us to consider the good news for us from a passage like this. I want to unpack a few things from verse 15 because there's a lot going on here.

Here's verse 15 again:

*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

*Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

Five amazing things going on here, five things to quickly notice:

Firstly, **"When they had finished eating..."** Jesus was still willing to sit down and have a meal with Peter. Just because Peter denied Jesus, Jesus wasn't willing to let that be the end of their relationship. They still ate together. That's good news. That's profound.

Secondly, **"Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, Son of John...'"** It would be so easy to miss this, but this phrase "Simon, Son of John" is the very first thing that Jesus says to Peter at the start of the gospel. In John 1, the two meet for the first time. Jesus looks at Peter then and says, "You are Simon son of John." I don't want to make too much of that – but to me, it speaks of a fresh start. John is bringing us back to the start, echoing Jesus's first words to Peter as Jesus and Peter get a new start together. It reminds me of Lamentations, which tells us that God's mercies are new every morning.

Thirdly, **"Do you love me more than these?"** This is a bit of a puzzle – do you love me more than what? What is the "these" pointing to? There are a few options. It could be the fishing equipment: "Do you love me more than your old life?" That's an important question we all need to ask ourselves. It could be his community: "Do you love me more than you love these other people?" That's another important question to consider. Do we put Jesus



first, above all else? But the most likely and most powerful option is that Jesus is asking, "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples love me?" Why would He ask Peter this? Because that's what Peter used to think. Back before he denied Jesus. Matthew's gospel goes into a little bit more detail than John's. Peter doesn't just say that he'd be willing to die for Jesus; he says: "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Peter was convinced that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples. Who betrays Him the next night? Peter does. "Peter, do you really love me more than the rest of them?" Ouch, there's a sting in the question, isn't there?

The fourth thing to notice is Peter's reply. **"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."** What's missing? "You know that I love you" - that's true. But which part of the sentence does he leave off? That old arrogance is not there, is it? "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." We can grow from our worst days, can't we? Peter's past is chipping away at some of Peter's performance and Peter's pride. This is a good thing.

Those of you who know our (Matt and Sarah Gray's) story know that we had to move to Coffs Harbour for a few years for work, from 2015 to 2018. I went up north at 23, freshly married, strong sense of call, on fire for Jesus, and I blew it again and again. These were not good years for me in my relationship with God. I stopped going to church for a while. Not living my best life. There's a long story there - maybe a good story for another day. But the gift was a realisation that I'm not Superman. A realisation that deep down, I'm not even a particularly good person. A realisation of how desperately I need God. I vividly remember not long after coming back, in January 2018, praying with Andrei and saying to him, "Andrei, I need you to pray for me. I just can't imagine myself in any position of ministry or leadership ever again." My ego was shattered.

But that's such a gift. I found it so liberating. For years I'd been living with this façade - trying to convince myself and everyone around me that I was brilliant. And yet I was so insecure. It was only when I deeply realised how not-brilliant I was that I began to feel better about myself and didn't need to project an image of someone other than who I am. Like Peter, my past had undermined my pride and my belief in my performance. "Peter, do you *really* love me more than the rest of my disciples?" "Jesus, you know I love you." Powerful moment.

The fifth thing to notice, **"Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."** Jesus is reinstating the call on Peter's life to be a pastor in the church that tends to God's people. And Peter does just that. He's the first one to preach after Pentecost, he's the first to realise that the Gospel was not just for Jews but for Gentiles, and he wrote two of the books in our New Testament. His legacy lives on and he's still feeding Jesus's lambs - you and me.

What a moment. And Jesus repeats the question three times - giving Peter the chance to overturn the three denials. Giving him the chance to hear again and again, "You denied

me but you didn't disqualify yourself. You denied me, but I'm still in relationship with you. You denied me but I won't define you by your worst day."

I want all of you to see yourself in this story. To be reminded that what is true of Peter is true of you and me. You are not defined by your worst day.

I want to leave you with Peter's three P's from this story.

1. Peter still had his **PEOPLE** even though he sinned.
2. Peter still had Jesus's **PRESENCE** even though he sinned.
3. Peter still had **PURPOSE** even though he sinned.

Peter still had his **people**, his community - he was still with the 12 and the others. His sin didn't cut him off from God's people. The same is true for you. You still belong here, and you always will. You don't belong because you behave; you belong because we are your people.

Peter still had Jesus's **presence**. Jesus still ate with him, walked with him, spoke with him. Jesus forgave him. He didn't overlook the sin - but that's the best part. If Jesus just ignored it, Peter would have felt rotten forever. But Jesus sat with him, spoke with him and made it right. That is available to all of us. We can all go into Jesus's presence even after our sin. Hebrews 4:16 says: *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* Peter still had Jesus's presence even though he sinned and so do you.

Peter still had **purpose** even though he sinned. He didn't disqualify himself from God's plan for his life. Neither did I - even though in 2018 I couldn't imagine myself in ministry, clearly, those years didn't define me. And the same is true for you. You have purpose - Jesus wants to use you to love, live and reveal Him, and your worst day doesn't disqualify you from that.

Now even though Peter still had people, presence and purpose, his past also removed his performance and pride. But that's a good thing. Our worst days can make us more humble, more empathetic, more sensitive, more careful. All of that is good. I think all of that is part of how God works all things together for our good.

But today, I want to land by reminding you how loved you are by God, how loved you are by Jesus. We all need to hear that. I want to encourage you to spend time with Jesus this week. The invitation is always there. Open up one of the Gospels and spend some time reading stories about Jesus - we will always find a story that the Holy Spirit uses to speak straight into our hearts.

If you don't call yourself a Christian, and you want to experience this love and forgiveness,

you want to have a PEOPLE and Jesus's PRESENCE and a PURPOSE – please speak to me or someone you came with today; we'd love to pray for you.

If it has been a tough week, please reach out to an ISR (Intentional Spiritual Relationship) and pray with them. You're not alone.

I want to finish by praying what the Apostle Paul prayed for the church in Ephesus"

*"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*