

## The All-Restoring Gospel – John 21:15-19

**Main Idea:** The heights of God's love can only be measured against the true depth of our sins.

### I. The Restored Disciples | John 21:15-17

**What makes the Gospel such good news is that, through the Gospel, sinners can not only be forgiven for their sins but also restored for life.** The Gospel infuriates the devil because it forces him to witness God forgiving and restoring those who were once under Satan's dominion. A clear picture of the restoration offered by the Gospel is found at the end of John's Gospel, where we learn of Peter's restoration to salvation and service to God. In the first half of John 21, Jesus met the disciples along the shore of the Sea of Tiberias after filling their net with fish. Jesus awaited them beside a charcoal fire where He prepared breakfast (21:9). Learning that it was Jesus, Peter flung himself into the waters and eagerly propelled himself to be in the Lord's presence. We can imagine that after a while, however, Peter would have looked at the charcoal fire and had his mind suddenly turned to another charcoal fire that burned outside the high priest's residence on the night of Jesus' arrest. Luke tells us that after denying the Lord the third time (by a charcoal fire), Jesus "turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:58-61). At that look, the unfaithful disciple went away, weeping bitterly for his failure.

It is frequently taught that the key to understanding Jesus' questions and Peter's answers is found in the different Greek words used in this passage for love. In the first two of Jesus' questions, He asked for Peter's love using the verb form of the word *agape* (referring to the highest form of love, a divine love that God offers from Himself). On the other hand, Peter answered by using the word *phileo*, which refers to a lower form of love involving emotional affection and friendship. **The Gospel is evidenced by God's love for His own even before they can love Him back** (John 3:16). Peter's failures, more than anything, highlight the biblical truth that obedience is the essential evidence of genuine love (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6). **Peter needed to understand that though he had forsaken Christ at the end of His ministry, Christ had not forsaken him.** The Gospel is not about man seeking God, but God seeking man (Rom.8:31-39). Jesus knew that for Peter to play the crucial role in the early church that He had chosen him for, he would need to be restored first. The other disciples needed to hear Peter's reaffirmation of his love for Christ and Christ's commissioning of him so they would be willing to follow his leadership. **Jesus only commissions transformed disciples.** Therefore, 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 true repentance. We can be sure that this was painful for Peter. We can imagine that with each question, his mind would have remembered each of the three times he had denied the Lord. The grief experienced by Peter (v.17) was a necessary part of the Lord's work, homing in on the full extent of betrayal.

We can see Jesus' purpose in bringing Peter to repentance not only in matching his three questions to Peter's three denials but also in Jesus' form of address, "Do you love me?" (v.15). Note that Jesus never asked Peter he loved His sheep, but rather if he loved Him. **The only way to serve God as he intends for people to serve Him is by loving Christ.** No pastor can shepherd Jesus' flock without loving Christ. No one can truly serve God without loving Christ. If you plan on serving in Kids' ministry at a local church, the first question you need to ask yourself is not "Do you love kids?" but "Do you love Christ"? God's purpose is more important than people's preferences, which is exactly what Jesus is teaching Peter in this text. Jesus does not merely look at people; He looks into people. The heart behind serving God in His kingdom lies in one major question: "Do you love Christ more than you love yourself?" Restoration requires cross-bearing (Matt.16:24-26; Luke 14:27). Peter remained obedient to the Lord's commission for the rest of his life. His ministry from that point forward involved proclaiming the Gospel (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26) and feeding the flock the Lord entrusted to him (Acts 2:42).

#### **To Ponder:**

1. Do you identify yourself with Peter? If yes, in what areas?
2. How do difficult times reveal the object of your trust?
3. What specific examples from your own life display Christ's mercy?

## II. The Commissioned Disciple | John 21:18-19

As Jesus secured Peter's repentance and restoration, He also commissioned Peter to his apostolic office. Here, we learn that **self-denial requires us to be willing to accept the calling of Christ as He sends us to serve Him as His disciples**, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt.10:38-39). Following Christ often requires people to abandon their dreams and aspirations. Self-denial might cause a family to move from a place they love in order to be at the center of God's will for their lives. Likewise, self-denial might require a disciple of Christ to remain right where he or she is, learning to be content and serving the Lord where there are already. One thing is common when it comes to Christ calling people to Himself: **all followers of Christ are called to actively embrace crosses**. Before knowing Christ, Peter was sort of in control of his actions, "When you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted" (v.18a). Jesus now tells Peter that the time has come for him to start doing things he did not want to do and go places he did not want to go, "But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (v.18b). Peter certainly was not looking forward to dying as a martyr by crucifixion, but that did not stop him from following his Savior. **Peter spent the last thirty years of his life knowing he would be crucified just like Jesus was, and he still served Him**. Peter understood that no one can follow Christ without identifying with Him in his death. It is perhaps because so few believers really take up their cross daily that the church in the West today is not persecuted as much as ignored.

John Stott, in commenting on verses 18-19, says, "If churches were to hold fast to the "old-fashioned" Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, and of salvation as an absolutely free and undeserved gift, the cross would again become a stumbling block to the proud. If we were to maintain the high moral standards of Jesus—of incorruptible honesty and integrity, of purity before marriage and fidelity in it, then there would be a public outcry that the church returned to Puritanism. If we were to dare once more to talk plainly about life and death, salvation and judgment, heaven and hell, then the world would rise up in anger against such 'old-fashioned rubbish.'"<sup>1</sup> Though self-denial and cross-bearing may seem unappealing, those who take up their cross are drawn into an ever-deepening fellowship with Christ and a holy communion that is worth more than all the treasures of the world. It is the cross-bearing believer, the one who actively embraces a countercultural, Christ-following lifestyle, who walks "not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (Psalm 1:1-2).

### To Ponder:

1. Practically, what does it mean to walk in a path of self-denial?
2. How has following Jesus changed your priorities?

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 481.