

Gone Fishing

John 21:1-17

By Ralph Kelley

If you would, open your Bibles to John chapter 21, John chapter 21. If you're using one of our pew Bibles that reading can be found on page 906. John chapter 21. I'll remind you that our senior minister David Strain is on vacation and so this would be a good time to remind you to be praying for him. He works hard and he's earned a good vacation so be praying for him and for his family that they would get good rest and we will look forward to having them back with us before too long. Before we look at God's Word together let us pray.

Father God, we're about to come and study Your Word and as we do we ask for Your Spirit's help that He would show us glorious truths of this portion of Your Gospel. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

John chapter 21 beginning in verse 1. Remember this is the Word of God:

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many,

the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.

Jesus Is Enough and Jesus Provides

This is a passage about Jesus being enough for us. It's a passage that shows us that when we have nothing, Jesus provides for us. It shows us that Jesus sustains us even as He provides and it's a passage that challenges us to ask ourselves this question, "Is Jesus really enough?" Is Jesus enough for us or do we think that we need more than Jesus?

Dr. Mark Rutland tells us a survey that was taken some years ago. Several thousand Americans were asked "What did they most want to hear from other people?" And the number one answer, it's not a surprise, the number one answer that we want to hear from others is, "I love you." And the second answer is not far off and not a surprise either. The second answer that we want to hear from others is, "I forgive you." And the third answer - that's a bit more of a shocker. The third answer that we want to hear is, "Supper's ready!" Supper is ready! But if you think about it just for a second, that's not too far off from the Gospel being summarized where we hear Jesus say, "I love you. I forgive you. Come into My presence and dine with Me."

I. A Jesus Who Provides Love

As we look at verses 1 through 9 here this passage is mainly looking at Peter. Peter, just a couple weeks prior to this, had done something he'd never guessed he would do. He denied the Lord Jesus Christ, not once, not two times, but three times. Peter is no doubt frustrated, disappointed, embarrassed, ashamed, and Peter and the other disciples are in Galilee at this time because Jesus had told them, "Go to Galilee and wait for Me." And while they're waiting, Peter decides

he wants to do the one thing he knows he's good at doing and that's he's going to go fishing. Maybe this would help take his mind off what he knows is an upcoming, uncomfortable conversation that he's going to have to have with Jesus. I'm sure it's a conversation that Peter was dreading but also a conversation that he couldn't wait to get over with. It reminds me of the time that I was not a small child and I had done something that I shouldn't have and my mother decided to extract a little parenting discipline and as she started the act I kind of laughed and I said, "I think I'm too big for this." And she, as a godly, kind, caring mother, she looked right at me, smiled, and she said, "Well maybe so, but your father will be home in two hours." Those two hours was the longest year of my life because I knew that dad and I were going to have an uncomfortable conversation and I suspect that Peter wasn't too far off on his thinking.

So while waiting for Jesus, we see that Jesus provides. And the very heart of the message of the Gospel is that Jesus saves us from our sins. It's a simple message that often gets lost or confused. We simply cannot do anything to save ourselves from our sins. And I think in these first nine verses we see an illustration of our inability to save ourselves. These are professional fishermen and they're out fishing. They've fished the Sea of Galilee many times; they know what they're doing. But at the end of the night they've caught absolutely nothing. As they begin to head for the shore they see a man who calls out to them, "Have you caught anything?" "No, we've not caught anything." "Well throw your nets over on the right side and you'll catch." And they do. They throw their nets over them and sure enough the fish fill up the nets. The man of course is not just any man; it was the Lord Jesus.

Only the Lord Jesus can bring Something out of Nothing

So what should we make of this account? Well it would certainly be fine for us to talk about the sovereignty of God, about how even the fish will go exactly where He tells them to go. We could talk about how the Lord makes daily provisions for His people, for certainly that's true. But those aren't the main things that I think we're to glean from this passage. No, the main thing that I want you to see from here is that only the Lord Jesus can bring something out of nothing. And this is a very important lesson because it's really talking about our hearts. These men have nothing in their nets. They are empty until the Lord Jesus fills them with fish. And this is exactly what Jesus does with all of His children. He takes our empty, dead, useless hearts and He fills them with His love, He fills them with Himself.

There's a meta-narrative that runs throughout the Bible where our Lord provides life when there's no way possible that it can happen. Genesis 1 - out of nothing God created everything; out of the dust He creates man. When Sarah is too old to have a child, it is God who graciously and lovingly brings her dead womb to life, Genesis 17. When God's people are completely enslaved in Egypt without any chance of being freed, it's the Lord who lovingly and graciously provides the

exodus. We see that in Exodus 12 and following. It's David, when he's facing Goliath and has no chance against the giant, that God graciously and lovingly provides - 1 Samuel 17. It's when Ezekiel is preaching to the dry bones that those bones come to life. Only the Lord can do that. Ezekiel 17. When Mary has yet to be with Joseph, yet she has a child. Luke 2. And of course it's God alone who won victory over the grave, who, after three days of being dead rose again from the dead and walked out of that grave. It's the same Lord who, on this day, fills the nets with fish. When there's no fish to be found the nets are full with fish.

The Love of Christ

And of course all this points to your heart. And as a reminder to those of you who are Christians, it's the Lord who took your dead heart and lovingly and graciously replaced it with a heart of life. But the new heart you have, it came at a great price. It cost Jesus His life. It was a great act of love on His part. John 15 tells us, "This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." We are to love one another as Jesus loves us. And we'll talk more about that in a few minutes. If you're not a follower of Christ and you're still trying to save yourself from your own sin, I want to encourage you to stop. Please stop. It's not going to work. You cannot do it. But with Jesus, all things are possible, even your salvation. Christian, if you're wondering this morning if God does truly love you or not, let me assure you that Jesus laid down His life for you and therefore says those three words we all want to hear, "I love you."

II. A Jesus Who Provides Forgiveness

As we turn our attention now to verses 15 to 17, this part of our text continues to speak about the love of Jesus but it also tells us an awful lot about forgiveness that I think we need to hear. This is a rather familiar exchange, is it not? Most of us have read this portion of Scripture over and over. And why is it so familiar to us? Why do we keep returning back to this text? Well I think it's that way because we want to hear those words, "I forgive you."

In the classic book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom tells of her family's protection of Jews in Holland during World War II. Ultimately, her family is arrested and they're separated for a while and they're imprisoned. And though Corrie and her sister end up in the same concentration camp together, they were treated just awful. They were treated like animals. For instance, all the women would be herded together like cattle when they would go to the showers and while the guards just stood there and watched. Corrie was the only member of her family that survived those concentration camps and after the war she spoke to many people at different times about her experience and about the need to forgive. But then came that night, and here's what she writes:

“I was in a church in Munich. I had come to Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land. And I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind I like to think that’s where our forgiven sins are thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean; gone forever.’ Solemn faces stared back at me not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence they gathered their wraps, and in silence they left the room.

And that’s when I saw him - the overcoat and the brown hat, a blue uniform and a visored cap. It came back with a rush. A huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out. ‘A fine message Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea.’ And I who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course. How could he remember one prison among those thousand of women? But I remembered him. The leather whip swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. ‘You mentioned Raven’s Rook in your talk. I was a guard there.’ No, he definitely didn’t remember me. ‘But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven men for the cruel things I did there, but I’d like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,’ again the hand came out, ‘will you forgive me?’”

Forgiveness. Forgiveness. When the disciples were together it had to be kind of the elephant in the room. All those men gathered together knowing that each of them had run away from Jesus on the night of His trial. They certainly didn’t speak of Peter’s three denials that he had that night. And so here they were, after that breakfast, after that miraculous catch of fish. Jesus takes Peter aside and it’s going to be a private but awkward conversation no doubt. And though it’s just between Peter and Jesus you get the sense that all the other disciples are listening. Maybe some of them looking out into the Sea of Galilee, some of them kind of looking down at the beach, but they’re listening. That’s when Jesus asked him the question and it’s a three-peat. Again in verse 15, “When they had finished breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ And he said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ And he said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’” Jesus asked him not once, not twice, but three times, ‘Do you love me?’ No doubt three times because Peter had denied him three times.

A Call to Love Christ Unreservedly

So why does Jesus first say to him, "Do you love me more than these?" Some think that the "these" there refers to the fishing boats and the nets and his old life. Some think that it may mean, "Do you love me more than these other apostles? I mean, after all, you deserted me but you hung out with them." But most likely the "more than these" is referring back to Peter's boast in Mark 14 where he says, "Even though others fall away I will not." But as we know Peter did fall away. He denied he knew Jesus; he denied he knew Jesus on three different times. And each denial grew stronger than the previous. But we read that after that third denial Peter went out and he wept bitterly. Peter was a broken man but his mindset that led to his sin of denying Jesus was that he simply did not want a crucified Jesus. He wanted a King Jesus, a Messianic figure that he could reign with forever. So now as Jesus confronts him with the question that really comes down to this - and that's for Peter and it's also for us - Do you love Jesus as He is, crucified and risen, or is your love for Him conditional on who you want Jesus to be? Will we accept Jesus on His terms? Will we accept that He does what's best for us and gives us what is best for us or do we think that we know more than God? And Peter's answer, the "you," is emphatic. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." No more boasts about loving Him more than the other guys do, no more boasts that his actions had proved his love for Him for certainly they haven't. Rather he appeals to what Jesus knows. He appeals to Jesus' understanding of Peter himself. Peter knows that Jesus knows him better than Peter knows himself.

Now notice Jesus does not ask Peter if he's willing to serve him, He doesn't ask Peter if he's delighted in the coming kingdom of God, He doesn't ask Peter, "Do you like all these miracles that I've performed, even this one today?" No, that's not what He's asking from Peter. What He's asking from Peter is, "Do you love me?" That's the issue friends. Do we love Jesus? Do we love Jesus? Not, "Do we love what Jesus does for us?" but "Do we love Jesus?" Peter was sorry for his sin of denying Jesus, he wept over that sin, but sorrow for sin alone is not enough. That's not true repentance. Repentance is a change of heart that means hating our sin and, and, loving Jesus. And whatever keeps us from loving Jesus and loving Him most of all, loving Him with our heart, our soul, our mind, our strength, well that's sin and we need to repent of it. Perhaps it's a person - your spouse, children, grandchildren. Maybe it's that boy or girl at school who may or may not even be a believer. Maybe it's significance that's in the way. You know, we want to be somebody. Maybe it's power or possessions. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's our agenda. Whatever stands in the way of our loving Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is sin and we need to repent of it and we need to love Jesus. Jesus has gone to the cross to redeem Peter for his sin. He died for Peter and for me and for you. He did it because He loves us. Love is the primary driving force to redeem us - the Trinity's love for one another and their love for us. "For God so loved the world He gave His only Son."

A Call to Love (and Forgive!) Christ's People Unreservedly

Jesus' follow up command for Peter after each of these questions of, "Do you love me?" is He's telling Peter to act like a shepherd. That means we are redeemed people for a purpose. With the cross of Jesus comes responsibility. The cross is not just about making hotel reservations in heaven or fire insurance from hell. The cross gives us a responsibility, a responsibility that we are to be like Jesus. "Be a shepherd," Jesus says. Psalm 23 gives us that marvelous picture - the Lord as our Shepherd. Isaiah 40 gives us a very poignant look at being a shepherd. "He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those who are with young." Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. Now He calls us to be shepherds, to care for the people around us. It's part of our God-likeness, to care for others. And what's the prime qualifier for Christian ministry? Well, it's love. It's love. Love is what Jesus' challenge for ministry is rooted in - love for Jesus and love for others. Yes, there's other desirable qualities, but love is indispensable. Do you love others enough to act as a shepherd towards them, caring for them, watching over them, rebuking them, nurturing them, but always doing it with love?

That former prison guard said to Corrie ten Boom, "Will you forgive me?" She writes:

I stood there, I whose sins had again and again been forgiven, and I could not forgive. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase he slow, terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it; I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition, that we forgive those who have injured us. If you do not forgive men their trespasses, Jesus says, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. I knew that not only as a commandment of God but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scares. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that also. Forgiveness is an act of the will and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Help! I prayed silently. I can lift my hand, I can do that much, but Lord, You supply the feeling. So woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and as I did an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother! I cried with my entire heart. For a long

moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

Well that's because love and forgiveness go hand in hand. We must forgive others. You might be saying, "But you don't know what he or she did!" And no, no I don't know. That's true. But I know that there is no sin that God won't forgive us and therefore there is no sin that we cannot forgive others. That's unconditional love on display right here in this passage. And if we want to think along with that great theologian, Tina Turner, and ask ourselves, "What's love got to do with it?" well the answer is, "Everything." Everything. Love has to do everything when it comes to knowing the love that we have from Jesus and how to forgive one another. I cannot love you apart from knowing His love. I cannot forgive you apart from knowing His forgiveness. Now that's not to say that some of our sins don't come with great consequences because of course often they very much do. Sin can make for messy situations. And when we encounter the mess of sin we should not ignore it or make it worse. We should do as Jesus does here in our passage and address it and work on reconciliation however possible. Jesus models that forgiveness and that love as He's meeting with Peter that morning. I'm here to tell you this morning that whatever sin you may have committed, whatever sin, Jesus forgives based on His love that He displayed to us in His death on the cross. If you have any doubt about Jesus' forgiveness for you, look to the cross. Look to Jesus and that's where you'll hear Him say those words we want to hear, "I forgive you."

III. A Jesus Who Provides Fellowship

Finally and ever so briefly, let's turn your attention to verse 12. I want to look at this third point here. It's found in verse 12. Jesus says to His disciples here that supper is ready, or more to the point on this day He says that breakfast is ready. Those whom Jesus loves and who love Jesus, those who have sought repentance and have found forgiveness in Jesus are welcomed into the fellowship of Jesus. Is there any place you'd rather be than in the fellowship of Jesus Christ? Notice the disciples' reactions. They knew they were with the Lord and there's no doubt that they were glad, for the only place where true joy is found is in the presence of Jesus Christ. Nothing in this world compares to Jesus and He invites His people to come and fellowship with Him.

Here's the reality of that morning. Peter and the other disciples, they thought that they were going fishing, but the reality of it is that they weren't, they weren't. You see, the fisherman in this account is Jesus and He went fishing for Peter's heart and He caught Peter and He reeled him in, broken, worn down, discouraged Peter, and He reeled him in, He inspected him, and after looking him over, instead of gutting him and eating him He threw him back out. He threw him back out into the world to make a difference for Jesus. Oh the marvelous grace and mercy of Jesus to forgive a person like Peter, like me, like you! Let's pray.

Thank You, Lord for Your Word. It is so good. We need Your Word, Lord. May Your Spirit continue to work the truth of this passage into our hearts and our minds and may we be people that love You, and because we know that You love us, may we be people that feel forgiven because You forgive us, and may we be people that desire to be in Your presence because You invite us to come and be with You. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

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