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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“WALKING IN GALILEE”  
John 21:15-19

■ It is a few weeks after Easter. Jesus reveals himself to Peter and seven other disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. After serving breakfast, he pardons Peter for disowning him and reinstates him to his place in the family of faith. It is an amazing demonstration of grace (God’s undeserved mercy and kindness).

Why does he do it? *What is his primary purpose?*

Is it so Peter can feel OK about himself? No! Is it mainly so Peter can become a good person? No! Is it mainly so Peter can go to heaven when he dies? No!

⊛ Those things are icing on the cake. Christ’s main reasons for saving Peter are infinitely more important – and they are also his main purposes in saving us: ① to glorify God the Father, and ② to build God’s kingdom.

But *how does God accomplish this* in our lives?

In John 21:15-19 the Lord calls Peter to three challenges. These are risky and strenuous; they are also noble and beautiful, for they glorify God and build up his kingdom.

□ In verse 15 “**Jesus [says] to... Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’**”

○ “**These**” could refer to Peter’s fishing gear, which signifies his life before discipleship. Or Jesus might be gesturing toward the other disciples.

Again in verse 16, Jesus asks: “**do you love me?**” And a third time, in verse 17: “**do you love me?**”

★ This is the Lord’s 1<sup>st</sup> challenge: love me more than your life apart from me; love me more than the comfort and security it provided; love me more than you love your friends and family; love me best.

As a young Christian I often said, “I love you, Lord,” but I really was not sure what my words meant, beyond a warm feeling toward God and a kind of general commitment.

🔗 I have since learned that obedience is the key. The Son puts it this way: “**Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.... Anyone who loves me obeys my teaching**” (John 14:21, 23) – even the teachings that are difficult, such as: {Lk 12:22} “**Do not worry about...what you will eat; or ...wear.**” {Mt 5:28} “**Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her.**” {Lk 6:27-28} “**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.**” And so forth.

✧ Jesus is our example in this. He pleaded three times, not quietly but {Heb 5:7} “**with loud cries and tears,**” {Mt 26:39} “**If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.**” {Heb 5:8} “**Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.**” In fact, {1 Jn 5:3-4} “**This is love for God: to keep his commands. And [they] are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world.**”

Not that I am perfectly obedient. Hardly!

→ Inside, a war is raging between the new, real me (who delights in God's law) and the old, phony me (who hates to submit). I'm with Paul, who cried out, {Ro 7: 24, 25} **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”**

There's that Good News! God chooses a Peter, chooses a Don Nelson, chooses a insert-your-name-here – not just at our got-it-together best, but even at our falling-apart worst! – and calls us to discipleship. And when we fail to {Mt 22:37} **“Love [God] ... with all [our] heart...soul and... mind”** (which, let's face it, happens every day), he meets us at our Galilee, forgives and reinstates us, and urges us again to rise to the challenge of love.

Loving God best glorifies him and builds up his kingdom. This is the purpose for which he saves us – not just so we can go to heaven when we die, not just to make us better people, and definitely not just to make us feel good about ourselves.

□ In verse 15 Jesus commands Peter: **“Feed my lambs.”** Again in verse 16: **“Take care of my sheep.”** Then the third time, in verse 17: **“Feed my sheep.”**

★ This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> challenge: serve others.

As a child, when adults asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I never answered, “A servant.” (What about you?)

Yet Jesus says: {Mt 20:26-27} **“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”**

Four observations:

- a) this is not hyperbole – Jesus' words mean exactly how they sound;
- b) this involves attitude and deeds – we must *act* like servants;
- c) true service does not depend on the merits of those we serve; and
- d) true servanthood is freely chosen by the servant – it is not selfishly inflicted by others.

We might be tempted to de-emphasize selfless service, or even mislabel it as “works righteousness” or “liberalism” (as some evangelical Christians do).

But what does the text say? Every time Jesus asks, {21:15-17} **“Do you love me?”** Peter replies, **“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,”** and the Lord follows up with the command to serve.

Do you hear the implied “if-then”? *If you love me, then “feed my lambs.” If you love me, then “Take care of my sheep.” If you love me, then “Feed my sheep.”* This sequence of (albeit unspoken) “if-then”s indicate a direct, causal, necessary relationship between loving God and serving others.

→ Service is the fruit and proof of *αγαπε* love. Christ Jesus declares, {Mt 22:37-40} **“Love the Lord your God with”** your whole being **“is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

In John 21 the Lord directs Peter to serve his **“sheep.”** Some have concluded from this that our obligation to serve is restricted to fellow Christians.

I disagree. Jesus is setting priorities, not limits. If we do not serve each other, what we do outside is of no consequence; but if we love our brothers and sisters, the service we give our un-churched neighbors takes on eternal value.

✧ Jesus is our example in this. He {Mt 20:28} **“did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”** – including the ambivalent masses who never acknowledged his lordship, and the hostile enemies who violently rejected it.

I need more practice at this. But praise God, when we fail to serve Christ Jesus he meets us at our Galilee, forgives and reinstates us, and urges us again to rise to the challenge of service!

Serving others glorifies God and builds up his kingdom. This is the purpose for which he saves us – not just so we can go to heaven when we die, not just to make us better people, and not just to make us feel OK about ourselves.

□ Finally, in verse 18, Jesus warns: **“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.”** This is not a reference to old age; it indicates **“the kind of death by which Peter [will] glorify God”** (verse 19). There is strong evidence that Peter was martyred on a cross in the year 64 AD.

★ This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> challenge: to be crucified with Christ, to be {Ro 6:5} **“united with [Jesus] in a death like his,”** to die with and for the Lord.

I am not glorifying death! God's Word celebrates abundant, eternal life.

However, {Ro 6:23} **“the wages of sin is death.”** And since {Ro 3:23} every human being has, without exception, sinned, {Ro 5:12} **“death [has come] to all people.”**

The question is not, will you die? It is *to whom will you die: God, or the sinful self?*

Those who die to God may {Mt 16:26} **“gain the whole world”** for a time; but that life is a mirage, and in the end they forever **“forfeit [their souls].”**

In contrast, those who die to the sinful self gain eternity in God's kingdom. Therefore, Jesus says: {Mt 16:24-25} **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”**

For tens of millions in our family this entails financial hardship, political oppression, judicial prosecution, physical abuse and, in some instances, the ultimate sacrifice. Hundreds of millions more of our brothers and sisters suffer severe social pressure and rejection by enemies of the cross.

But the basic meaning is common to every follower of Christ, and much less dramatic: it is offering our {Ro 12:1-2} **“bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God”** and being **“transformed by the renewing of”** of our minds as {2 Co 10:5} **“we take captive every thought to make it obedient to”**

Jesus and {Ro 8:13} “**put to death the misdeeds of**” our sinful nature.

✧ Jesus is our example in this. Do you remember when he was tempted in the desert? He could have had limitless wealth; yet he sometimes went hungry and was usually homeless. He could have charmed the crowds with dazzling displays; but he did not grandstand. He could have seized control of every political system and army and conquered the world; instead, he endured the cross.

I would like to say I have mastered this, but that would be a lie. I am that so glad God is merciful and kind! When we fail to take up the cross Christ Jesus meets us at our Galilee, gladly forgives us, reinstates us, and urges us again to rise to the challenge of death!

Dying with and for the Lord glorifies God and builds up his kingdom. This is the purpose for which he saves us – not just so we can go to heaven when we die, not just to make us better people, and not just to make us feel OK about ourselves.

This summer we have been exploring what it means to walk with Jesus. While we have covered a lot of ground, we have not exhausted the topic. (That would require a lifetime!)

But putting it in the simplest terms, to be a disciple is to embrace the three-fold challenge to love God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, serve others, and die with and for the Lord.

Are we up to the challenge as individuals, as families, as a congregation?

Are we heeding the call to love, serve, and die – not merely with words, but with verifiable actions?

Are we walking with Jesus now? Will we still be walking with him tomorrow?

May the answer be a resounding “Yes!” “Yes!” and “Yes!”