

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part seventy-four

Sunday, March 22nd, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1792 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

WHEN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS DISTORT THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE

John 21:15-25 - "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." [16] 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." [17] 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. [18] Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, 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." [19] (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." [20] Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" [21] When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" [22] Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" [23] "So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" [24] This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. [25] Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

The last words of John's gospel deal predominantly with the two disciples, *Peter* and *John*. And there is a specific purpose tied to each. *Peter* is mentioned because it is in him we find demonstration of the kind of tenderness and restoring grace from Jesus John knows we are all going to repeatedly need. *John* is mentioned because of the rumor that circulated around his future. John wants his readers to understand the important distinction between the actual words of the Scriptural account and some of the traditions that arose out of those words. John records his personal story to underline the difference between the words of Scripture and the various traditions that can arise around them. The *words* are infallible. The *traditions* are not.

1) **THERE IS AN INCREDIBLE GRACE REVEALED IN JOHN'S FINAL ACCOUNT OF JESUS' DEALING WITH PETER**

John 21:15 - "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."

Without a doubt Peter would have been left in a questionable light without John's closing account. True, Jesus had already taken the initiative in reassuring Peter in the announcement of His resurrection (**Mark 16:7**). But John closes with this *public* account of Peter's reinstatement by Jesus. Jesus proves His *trust* in Peter.

I don't know why I never considered before the possibility (we have no recorded evidence) that the rest of the disciples may have resented the fact that Peter, after bragging of his loyalty exceeding theirs (**Matthew 26:33-34**), denied even *knowing* His Lord. The disciples *had* to consider that. After all, they were competitive enough to scrap over the best seats in the kingdom of God. Is it impossible to think there may have been some undercurrent of resentment toward Peter? Could this be at least part of the reason Jesus deals so specifically with Peter *in front* of the rest of the disciples? Why doesn't Jesus say the same words to *all* of them? Why *just* Peter?

And I think it's because Peter *appeared*, and probably *felt* the most disqualified of the whole group. I think Jesus wants to make clear that precisely the one who had denied Him the most was being loved and called by His Lord into the first mission of the post-resurrection church. Even if *forgiveness* was possible for Peter *ministry* seemed impossible. Surely he was disqualified.

He didn't just deny Jesus once. Several gospel accounts make his denial of Jesus more *deliberate* and *committed*. He *repeated* his denial *three times*. He refused to recant his betrayal after the second offense. He kept going, cursing His Lord. It all seemed more *premeditated* than one emotional lapse. Three repeated betrayals. Peter kept his denial in play.

Is this why Jesus lovingly allows Peter *three chances to pronounce his love*? Jesus gives Peter a chance to probe his own

soul deeply. He gives Peter a chance to become more certain of his inner self. Peter's sincerity is bolstered with each declaration. It's as though each of the three divinely summoned requests for love helps stamp out the remains of each of those three denials.

Behold Jesus helping fumbling Peter to *"keep himself in the love of God"* (Jude 21).

2) THE ONLY ACCEPTABLE MOTIVE FOR MINISTRY TO CHRIST IS LOVE FOR CHRIST

John 21:15-17 - "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."* [16] 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."* [17] 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."*

All sorts of people from all sorts of religions or no religion at all do loving, good deeds in this fallen world. Christians have no corner on humanitarianism or philanthropy. There is enough of the remains of the image of God in all people and enough of God's common, unrecognized grace showered down upon us to prompt much good and restrain much evil. Of this, at the very least, we should all be certain and thankful.

But that's not what this text is about. This text is about *servicing Christ*, not just *servicing each other*. There is a gospel to be proclaimed with *words* in addition to the love of Christ to be shown with *deeds*. And before either one of those missional events can be fruitful *to our souls* or pleasing *to our Lord* there comes this issue of *motive*.

Jesus doesn't tell Peter to feed a single lamb or sheep immediately. There is another issue to settle first. True enough, there are those *fish to be caught* just as there are those *sheep to be fed*. There is both *evangelism* and *discipleship* in the wings. But neither is first on the agenda.

"Peter, do you love me? And do you love me more than anything else in the whole world?" That's the meaning of those cryptic words in **verse 15** - "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?...."

Peter had once bragged he was more deeply loyal than any of the others. But now you can't help but feel Peter might be a little less self-reliant - a little less sure of his own strength. Jesus leads Peter gently into the understanding that no one is ready to minister for Jesus while blinded by delusions of spiritual greatness.

Peter doesn't answer Jesus probing question saying, *"Yes, Lord. I do love you more than any of these!"* It's just, *"I love you Lord. That's all I can say."*

Church, be constantly humble enough to re-learn this truth. Everything needful in your life begins with loving Jesus and then loving Jesus *more*. This is the fertilizer of ministry. How hard it is to remember in this needy, hungry, pleading world, full of broken hearts, food banks, orphanages, and television cameras, that only good works done out of *love for Jesus the Christ, God the Son, have eternal significance*. They're not the only works that have *significance*. All good works are *good* in the sense of meeting temporal need. But only deeds done out of love for Christ have *eternal* fruitfulness.

This is why the only question asked of Peter is about Jesus. This is the *foundation* of everything else Peter and the rest of the church will ever do. And if that all sounds a bit familiar, it's because Jesus already told Peter this was the foundation earlier - **Matthew 16:16-18** - "Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." [17] And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

And the *"this rock"* in **verse 18** isn't Peter. It's Jesus. It's that wonderful declaration in **verse 16** - "....You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The foundation is the same as Jesus questions Peter in our text. As Peter blubbers out his profession of loving Jesus with all his heart he is being readied for ministry. The most fruitful mission flows out of a heart overwhelmed with *divine*

forgiveness and abounding in *Christ-centered worshipful love*. This is what keeps ministry from being *despairing* when fruitless or *proud* when successful.

For all who follow Jesus in obedience this morning, we need this picture of Peter. It is hard to follow Jesus as His ministering church filled with the burden of *destructive memories* of failure to our Lord. O, how we need the unburdening lightness only Christ's forgiveness can bring! Give Jesus your faltering heart and tell Him you love Him still.

3) THE STORY OF JOHN'S RUMORED DEATH AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

John 21:18-25 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, 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." [19] (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." [20] Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" [21] When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" [22] Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" [23] So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" [24] This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. [25] Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

I said in the introduction this gospel closes with the account of two disciples, Peter and John. The account of Peter is a reminder of divine grace and loving service. The account of John is included for more *doctrinal* reasons. As John writes his account 60 years after these events he's more keenly aware of a danger that crept into the young church and *also* more deeply aware of the solution to this problem.

John, ever the theologian, gives a caution to the church in the form of an incident surrounding something Jesus said about the death of these two disciples. And His remarks about John's death are full of teaching for the church today.

In a nutshell, Jesus told Peter he would die a martyr's death. He would be stretched out and crucified, much like His Lord. Historians tell us this is precisely what happened.

Peter and John are together with Jesus when this news is given to Peter. All goes well until Peter turns and sees John standing there as well. The next question is obvious - "*Lord, what about this man?*" (21). I would have asked the very same thing.

Jesus makes clear this is not Peter's concern. He says if He decides to let John live until He comes again, what's that to Peter? And then come those fascinating words from John to the effect that there was circulated a story in the church - and quite broadly circulated at that - that this disciples (John) was not going to die.

Now to John's point - John 21:23 - "*So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"*"

There spread an oral tradition - before any of these words of Jesus were set down and recorded under divine inspiration - that something was actually said by Jesus that He never said. It was *considered* true - as true as anything else Jesus was to have said and done. It was quite broadly *treated* as true by many in the early community of believers. But John says it didn't line up with what *he wrote down as his Scriptural account*. Again, they were words *given* the authority of Christ that didn't *possess* the authority of Christ.

John wants what the church says to line up with what the Scriptures say. John doesn't want anything circulating among believers that doesn't have Scriptural evidence behind it. Even if *everyone* came to believe Jesus said something to John, if He isn't recorded *in the Scriptures as saying it, John doesn't want it accepted*.

And I think there's meaning in this account for today's church. I have no fight to pick with any church proclaiming Christ crucified and raised from the dead for our redemption. But it is a fact that much of the church declares itself the cradle of much tradition that isn't found in the pages of Scripture. And I think that's exactly the situation John's words address.

Traditions not recorded in the text can assert something the inspired text doesn't say. We have **proof** of such right in our text. The inspired apostle **speaks directly about it**. Here is evidence we can put no dependence on anything **but** the text or anything **in addition** to the text. This is surely John's point. He is flat out telling us what might be **expected** from traditions passed on from age to age, however sincerely, but not recorded in the Biblical text.

As we wrap up our study of this extended gospel account let me plead with this church to feed on the Biblical text. Surely this is John's point in those closing two famous verses:

John 21:24-25 - "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. [25] Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

I want us all to see there are **two** related, but slightly different issues in John's closing words. The **first** we've looked at. Traditions can arise and be broadly accepted that distort the written text. And John wants those traditions to be **recognized** and **rejected**.

But there's a **second** issue in John's closing words. Not only just the church reject traditions that **contradict** the text (I think most of us would find that obvious), but she must never **supplement** the faith with additional traditions **not included** in the text.

John is very clear. Jesus did many other things **not** recorded in the text of Scripture. He's not saying these things never happened. They **did** happen. But John is very clear we don't rest our faith on those things. And we don't simply because they aren't given the status of sacred text.

That's a reason John talks about all the things Jesus did, but were not recorded in the Scriptural accounts. He's telling us **not** to base our faith on those things. It's not that Jesus didn't **do** those other things. It's just that, not being **written** they only have the status of **tradition**, not **Bible**. And we don't anchor our faith to **tradition**. We anchor it to **text**. **That's John's whole closing point**.

I said a minute ago I wanted to usher in a fresh plea to pour over the Biblical text. Why else would we take a year and a half to pour over John's gospel together. Only the Biblical text is worth that kind of corporate time. We have nothing but the text to teach. And let me back this plea with something you may not have considered.

It has to do with the death of the Apostle John. Yes, the tradition - like many others - was wrong. John did die. But he lived a very long time - most say to over 100 years. And I think there was reason he was kept so long - a reason that has a great deal to do with you and with me.

I believe we are living in a much safer age than did John. I know, there is much corruption and distraction that John could never have imagined. But there is a sense in which we are still safer.

Here's why. God allowed John such a long life that he lived to see and respond to all sorts of heresies and lies and false teachings. And we face those things too. But there's a difference. We have - in a way John and Peter and Paul and the rest of the early church didn't - we have a **Biblical record of those heresies and the proper response to them**. We have a divine provision they never had.

In Peter's words, "**....we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, [20] knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**"(2 Peter 1:19-21).

"More fully confirmed" are the important words. The passing of time has deepened the foundation of our faith. We've seen the testing and the fulfilling and the confirming of the written text in deeper ways than its authors ever could. Read what's **written**. You need nothing else. Read it until you **know it**. And once you know it, like John says in his final gospel words, **believe it** with all your heart. That's where eternal life has its roots.

We made it, church. God bless.