

The Secret of Service

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The scene before us in John 21 is a familiar and popular spot, the Sea of Galilee, probably the world's most famous body of water.

It will be of interest to note those present: "Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together" (John 21:2); an interesting group that might be called the convention of problem children, each a problem in his own way.

First and foremost was Simon Peter – impulsive, impetuous, affectionate, even saying that he would lay down his life for his Lord. Thomas was also present, Thomas the magnificent skeptic, always raising some question or casting some doubt. Then there was Nathanael, a doubter at the beginning of Christ's ministry. Philip came to him and said, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth!" Hearing that, Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" However, he went with Philip to the Lord Jesus, who said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." It was then that Nathanael made his first confession:

Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49)

Also in the group were James and John, to whom Jesus gave the name "sons of thunder," a name well deserved. There were two other disciples, but their names are not mentioned. And since the Holy Spirit omitted them, let us identify ourselves with them – you and me; we are the two who would probably classify as problem children at the Sea of Galilee.

This group had left Jerusalem and were there in Galilee by commandment, Christ's commandment, relayed by the women who had been at the empty tomb: "Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me" (Matthew 28:10). So here the disciples are at the Sea of Galilee.

I'm Going Fishing

It is springtime, the Passover season. Warm zephyrs from the south make ripples near the shore and whitecaps out on the sea. The surrounding hills are green, and there are wildflowers in profusion. (I once saw it like that a few days after Easter, and I imagine it was even more beautiful two thousand years ago.) They may have waited and waited for the Lord Jesus to come. Peter would be the one to become impatient and, after pacing back and forth and looking up and down the shore, would be the one to say, "I am going fishing." And the six others join him.

They fish all night and catch nothing. This may be the only true fish story that has ever been told! Dr. Scotts calls it the failure of the experts. These men fish all night without catching one fish! They had been restless before, and now they are restless and frustrated. It's easy to fish when you catch fish and frustrating when you don't. They knew how to fish – that's the way they had made their living – but that night of failure was in the will of God for them.

The psalmist says in Psalm 1:3, speaking of God's man, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit *in its season*." The fruitage of man's labor will come forth at a time when it will fit into God's plan and purpose. We are living in a day when everything is measured by the yardstick of materialism. Mathematics is the language of the hour, and to many it is the language of success. When will we learn that spiritual values cannot be determined by figures?

They fished all night and caught nothing! It's hard to fish when the fish are not biting.

The missionary Adoniram Judson had the same experience in Burma when the people were not turning to Christ. His missionary society in New York wanted to bring him home. They asked, "What are the prospects?" He replied, "The prospects are as bright as the promises of God." Living according to Christ's instructions is the most important thing!

Then on the Sea of Galilee morning dawned, and it must have been a glorious morning. On the morning I was there, I felt like shouting when I thought of this incident.

But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. (John 21:4)

I think this was a normal experience. He was in His glorified body, and He could be recognized; yet they would have been a distance out on the lake, and in the early morning it would be difficult to identify people on the shore.

Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." (John 21:5)

The Greek word for "children" is almost like saying, "Sirs." It is not a term of endearment like "little children" in 1 John. Their answer is a short "No." It's amazing how emphatic one can be and how little one likes to talk about failure. Although they answer Him, they don't want to talk about it. If they had a good catch of fish, they all would be showing Him how long they were.

This is a question He is bound to ask every one of us someday: "Did you catch anything? What did you do for people down there on earth?" I hope your answer will not be the same as theirs, "No, I didn't catch a thing."

And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. (John 21:6)

The whole thought here is that He directs the lives of His own. He gives the instructions, and they are to be obeyed. When they fish according to His instruction, the net fills. Notice, the net does not break even though it is full.

There was another time recorded by Luke when Peter caught a miraculous number of fish. It was in the early days of Jesus' ministry, and He was calling Peter to be a fisher of men. That time the net broke. I think Peter was to realize that many would follow Jesus, but they would not all be believers – the net would break and many fish would swim away. This time the net did not break but was drawn to land, "full of large fish." Peter is going to be called to feed the sheep and feed the lambs. With what? With the Word of God. With the gospel of a risen, glorified Christ. The gospel will not only save, but it will hold. Even in their failures, believers are kept by the power of God through faith.

It's the Lord!

We see in this incident that Jesus Christ has a purpose for His own. He wants to direct our lives. If we obey, He will bless and have wonderful fellowship with us. He is the Lord of our wills.

Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. (John 21:7)

John has a spiritual perception that Simon Peter doesn't have. Three years before, Jesus had called them to follow Him, and perhaps it was at this same spot. But now they have gone back to fishing, and the Lord calls them again to fish for the souls of men.

Peter may not have the discernment of John, but have you noticed that at every opportunity he gets close to the Lord? The other men sit in the boat and wait until they get to shore. Not Simon Peter. He can't wait! He wants to be close to his Lord. I love this man.

But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. (John 21:8, 9)

What a welcome sight for tired, hungry men! Oh, how our Lord loves His own!

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. (John 21:10, 11)

Notice that although Jesus had fish laid on a bed of coals for their breakfast on the shore of Galilee, He also asks for some of the fish they had caught. He accepts their service. When they have fished at His command, He accepts what they bring. What blessed fellowship there is in this kind of service!

There by the Sea of Galilee the fire was made; the coals had burned their course. When the men arrived on shore, cold, wet and hungry, Jesus said, "Come and dine," or, "Come and eat breakfast." What an invitation! The resurrected Christ had prepared their meal.

Jesus did command, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15), but He would rather you come and have breakfast with Him before you go. The lovely part is that the resurrected Lord, God Himself, feeds them. If only we would sit today and let Him feed us! He wants to feed His own.

Now here on the shore of Galilee He has prepared breakfast for them, and they sit down to a hearty meal. You will recall that the last time this group had eaten together was in the Upper Room – and what a contrast that meal was with this! The other was before His crucifixion; this is after His death and resurrection. On the former occasion they were in an upstairs room; now they are out of doors. Before they were in the city; now they are away from the city's crowds. Before they were conversing excitedly; now there is great quietness. In the Upper Room the shadow of

the Cross was upon them, and in the flush of the moment they were asking many questions. Peter said, "Where are You going? Let me go with You – I will lay down my life for You!" Thomas said, "We do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" Philip said, "Show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." And Judas, not Iscariot, said, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us and not to the world?"

How different is this meal on the seashore, which was eaten in silence – not even the Lord Jesus said anything. When He had told them, "Come and eat breakfast," not one of them asked, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. The resurrected and glorified Jesus was the same Jesus, though there was a difference born of the Resurrection, and they would not be so familiar with Him now.

And so these men are eating breakfast with Him. They know that He is the risen and glorified Christ, and they say nothing. This is a men's meeting. I call attention to this fact, for we are living in a day when Christianity is looked upon as a woman's interest. But in its beginnings we find this group of virile fishermen, rugged in life and rugged in faith.

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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." (John 21:15)

Here is something very important. After the meal, the Lord Jesus questioned Peter three times. Peter answered three times, and on the basis of that the Lord Jesus commissioned him three times.

Why three times? Why not just once? We are not sure that we know, but three times Peter had denied Christ publicly, and three times he makes an affirmation. This, then, is the restoration of Simon Peter to service.

There are those who contend that this elevates Peter above the other apostles. There is not a word to prove that. Because of his denial, Peter had fallen and was in disgrace, and in this act the Lord brought him back to the level of service with the others. He is brought back publicly to the position which he had occupied before.

The Lord Jesus had appeared to him privately (1 Corinthians 15:8). Details of that are not recorded, but it was then that he was restored to fellowship by his repentance. But on this occasion the Lord restores him to service.

Peter Is Questioned

Now look briefly at the mechanics of this passage. There are three interrogations by the Lord. There are three declarations of Simon Peter. There are three exhortations or imperatives of the Lord Jesus. While the three interrogations are similar, each of them is different. As to the declarations of Peter, the first two are identical, but the third statement adds, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." The three exhortations of the Lord are all different. First, He tells Simon Peter, "Be grazing My lambs." Second, "Shepherd My sheep," and third, "Be grazing My sheep." You will want to consider the three aspects of this questioning.

Jesus must have looked across the dying embers of that fire upon which He had prepared their breakfast and straight into the eyes of Simon Peter as He said, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"

Note the significance of his name. To begin with He called him Simon. That is interesting – Simon son of Jonah – why did He call him Simon? You may recall that when the Lord Jesus first met this man, his brother Andrew had brought him to Jesus, and when Jesus looked at him, He said in effect, “You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas.” Cephas is the Aramaic word for “Rock Man.” In Greek it is *Petros*, and that name clung to him. We find that over in Caesarea Philippi, when he gave that marvelous testimony concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” the Lord Jesus said in effect, “Blessed are you, Simon [He goes back to his old name] ... you will be called Peter because you are going to be a Rock Man from here on. You will be a man who will stand for something, but right now there is still a question.” And so the Lord reminds him of his old name.

If you and I today think that we are somebody important, perhaps He would like to tell us just who we really are! Perhaps we are like Simon, the wishy-washy, mollycoddle fellow who tried to please everybody, who attempted to boast and was filled with pride. Our Lord dealt with him and settled him quietly when He said, “Simon [his old name], do you love Me more than these?”

Words for Love

There are three words in the Greek language that are translated into the English by the one word *love*. Perhaps, my friend, you are not aware of the fact that the English language is a beggar for words. We have the one word *love*, and that is about all. Hollywood today would give a million dollars for another word. The best they have done is *sex*, and that is pretty low. But Greek is a language that is versatile; it is flexible. They have several words for this thing called love.

The first word we will look at is the word *eros*. In the use of this word the Greeks degraded the meaning of love by personifying it. The fact of the matter is they made “Eros” a god and put together in combination the names Aphrodite and Eros. Today we know these names better as Venus and Cupid. The latter are the Roman names, but they are the same, as the Greeks are the ones who started this idea with Aphrodite and Eros. *Eros* is a word of sensuality, and we do believe that the Hollywood word *sex*, which has really been put into high gear today, would best express what the Greeks had in mind. But this word *eros* is never used in the Word of God.

There is another Greek word, *phileo*, and it means “friendship.” It has to do with the affection and the emotion in a human relationship at its very best usage. We get our word *philanthropic* from it, and *Philadelphia* comes from it – Philadelphia, the “city of brotherly love.” And that is a word that is used in Scripture.

The third Greek word for love is *agapao* – it is a word of dignity, the highest and noblest word and, in connection with this verse, there is always the note of worth; that either the lover or the beloved is “worthy” of love. I am sure this is a Bible word, for we see it used in John 3:16: “For God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Again, Paul said, “Who *loved* me, and gave Himself for me.” John said, “We *love* Him, because He first *loved* us.” These are instances where this word appears, and it is the word Christ used twice with Simon Peter.

Now notice that our Lord’s first question to Peter is, “Do you love Me more than these men love Me?” You will recall that the Lord Jesus said, the last time they were in the Upper Room, “One of you will betray Me” (John 13:21). Peter doubtless thought, *Yes, I haven’t trusted this crowd either*. But to the Lord he said, “There is one fellow here on whom You can depend – You can count on me.” Obviously Peter didn’t know himself. But now the Lord Jesus says to Peter,

“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me with divine love more than these other disciples love Me with divine love?” That is essentially what He is saying. Now listen to Simon Peter. “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Here Simon will not use the word *agapao* but comes down to the word *phileo*. In other words, “You know that I have an affection for You.”

There are many who find fault with Peter for this, but he did the best he could. You see, the love of God, the *agapao* love, is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us, and Peter was not yet filled with the Holy Spirit. Christ had not yet ascended and the Holy Spirit had not yet indwelt believers, so this big, rugged fisherman expressed the deepest affection that was in his heart for the Lord Jesus Christ.

But also, if you want my opinion, this man is through boasting. Never again will he brag of what he will do. Never again will you hear him saying, “I am going to do something big for the Lord.” From here on he is going to do something big, but he is not going to say anything about it. He comes to the low plane, “I have an affection for You.”

Our Lord did not censure Simon Peter for failure to rise to the heights of love. No, He recommissioned him and gave him his first imperative, saying, “Feed My lambs,” or better still, “Be grazing My baby lambs (My tiny lambs).” These are the new Christians who, regardless of age, are baby lambs to Him. And if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will want to feed His lambs. Each Lord’s day there are millions of Sunday school teachers who feed a host of His little lambs, and they do it because they love Him.

Now we come to the second interrogation. The Lord Jesus asks a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” No longer does our Lord make the comparison with the other disciples; He makes it purely personal: “Can you, Simon, say from your heart that you love Me with a divine love?”

Again Simon Peter cannot ascend the heights. He answers as on the first occasion, “Lord, You know that I have a human affection for You,” and this comes from his heart, doubtless every fiber of his being trembling at the words. The Lord does not criticize him but adds a second commission, “Tend” or “Shepherd My sheep.” That means to discipline by giving direction.

Today we have it all mixed up; we try to discipline the young Christians and feed the old ones. The Lord said, “Feed the young ones and discipline the old ones.”

An anxious father asked, “How can I bring up my boy in the way he should go?” and the answer was given him, “By going in that way yourself.”

Another has expressed it poetically:

*'Twas a sheep, not a lamb, that strayed away,
In the parable Jesus told;
A grown-up sheep, that had gone astray,
From the ninety and nine in the fold.
Out on the hillside, out in the cold,
'Twas a sheep the Good Shepherd sought;
And back to the flock, safe into the fold,
'Twas a sheep the Good Shepherd brought.
Why for the sheep should we earnestly long,
And as earnestly hope and pray?
Because there is danger, if they go wrong,
They will lead the lambs astray.*

*For the lambs will follow the sheep, you know,
Wherever the sheep may stray;
When the sheep go wrong, it will not be long
Till the lambs are as wrong as they.
And so with the sheep we earnestly plead,
For the sake of the lambs today;
If the sheep are lost, what terrible cost
Some lambs will have to pay.*

– Author unknown

It is not Junior, but his father, who needs the discipline.

The third interrogation reveals an interesting dealing of the Lord with Simon Peter. Our Lord dropped down and used the same word that Simon had been obliged to use and said, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you have a human affection for Me?” It grieved Peter because the Lord asked him this for the third time, and with a burst of emotion he said in effect, “You know that I love You. I wish with all my heart I could say that I have a divine love for You, and I think I do. But I have found out that I cannot trust myself anymore, for I make such big statements but do so little. Lord, I am sorry that it is necessary for You to come down to my plane of *phileo* love, but it is the best I can do. You know my heart. You know all things. You know I love You.” Then the Lord Jesus gives him the third imperative: “ Be grazing My sheep. ”

There is much church activity today, but why is there so little Bible study in the pulpit? Do not misunderstand me when I say this, but my conviction is that there is little study of the Word of God because we must first answer Christ’s question, “Do you love Me?” Until that is answered in the affirmative, the commission “Feed My sheep” will not be given to us.

We must remember that the Lord Jesus commissioned Simon Peter on one basis alone – “Do you love Me?” This is the badge of Christianity. The Roman officials sent men to spy out the Christians, and Tertullian writes that when the spies returned, their report was that the Christians were strange folk; they had no idols, but they spoke of One who was absent by the name of Jesus, and how they loved Him! And how they loved one another! That is the report made of the Christians of that day. I wonder how a report made of the people in your church and my church would compare.

Listen to Paul writing to the Corinthians: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus, let him be anathema. I can have all knowledge, but if I have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 16:22 and 13:2 KJV). You and I are under this acid test: Do we love Him?

The greatest drives in the world are not intellectual. Rather, they are drives of the heart. Christianity is a matter of the heart. And we must start right —“with the heart one believes unto righteousness.” The church today needs a baptism of emotion; it needs real and genuine tears coming from the heart that can say, “Lord Jesus, You know that I love You.” Christianity is a love affair. Peter wrote, “Whom having not seen, you love.”

In Portsmouth, Virginia, back in antebellum days, there was a famous blind preacher by the name of Waddell. Since this was a seacoast town, late one Sunday afternoon a sailing vessel put into port, and the sailors went ashore. The captain and three of the sailors were Christians and seemingly by accident went into the church where Waddell was preaching.

That night his text was the same as the one used here, and he concluded with this question, “Can each one of you who is a member say at this time, ‘Lord Jesus, You know that I love You’?” A hush went over the congregation. Then one of the sailors, forgetting where he was,

broke the silence and cried out with all of the enthusiasm of his young heart, “Lord Jesus, You know everything. You know that I love You!”

In my own experience I vividly recall a night in Georgia, walking together with a fellow seminary student and talking enthusiastically about what we were learning concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. Suddenly we stopped in our tracks. We had reached the top of the hill, and before us was the rising moon – oh, that Georgia moon, how beautiful it was! We just stood there and watched silently. Finally my friend said, “*He* made that!”

Then he said something else that has been very helpful to me. He told me that every night before going to sleep, he told the Lord Jesus, “I love You.”

My friend, loving Him is a wonderful experience. It is, as Peter wrote in his first epistle, “joy inexpressible and full of glory!” And it is the secret of having a ministry that God can and will use.