**A LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

**John 21:1–17**

**Key Verse: 21:15**

*“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”*

Good morning everyone! Thank you so much for joining us on this Sunday morning to worship God and listen to his Words.

Today, we will be studying the 7th and last lesson on How to have a relationship with God. In the first 6 lessons, we learned about the parts of the relationship: the foundational how, the nature of it, commitment, trust, obedience, and communication. In this 7th lesson, John teaches us about God’s love. And so the title of the message is “A Love Relationship with God.”

A love relationship with God. Goodness. I say goodness because understanding what it means to have a love relationship with another person is profound and hard to describe. Those we love – family and friends – are people who we can see and talk face-to-face. But then how can we have this profound love relationship with God, who we cannot see or talk face-to-face? It seems very abstract and difficult.

But this passage teaches us that having a love relationship with God is tangible and real. I believe that this important interaction between Jesus and Peter shows us the most fundamental truth of life – what it means to be loved by Jesus, what it means to love Jesus, and why this is a fundamental truth. I pray through this message that we can deeply understand and experience Jesus’ love, so that we are compelled to share this love with others.

**Part 1. The Unfailing and Everlasting Love of God (through The Grace of Jesus)**

John 21 is one of deepest, most heart-moving passages in the bible about the relationship between Peter and Jesus. This chapter shows us how Jesus restores the failed and painful relationship through his unconditional, one-sided love for Peter as well as the disciples.

So we will be thinking about this relationship today.

Look at Verses 1-3. Peter and six other disciples were together when Peter said, “I’m going out to fish,” and when the other disciples decided to join him.

This is a shocking declaration because Peter hadn’t fished for a living in a long time. The last time was about three years before when Jesus called him to be his disciple. At that time, Peter had dropped everything to follow Jesus. Learning from Jesus was his life. Serving Jesus was his life. Plainly, Jesus was his life. Jesus was his teacher, mentor, friend, father figure.

But now, some three years later, Peter was lost, not knowing what to do with his life. In the blink of an eye, Jesus was arrested and crucified and buried. When these disciples lost their leader and their faith were tested, they all ran away or hid. These supposed loyal followers and steadfast believers of Jesus, especially Peter who boasted about his love for Jesus, deserted Jesus when he needed them the most. Sitting in the room now with a few others, together lost, Peter decided he would return to his fishing business.

To be able to understand what happened to Peter, we need to think about his past with Jesus. When Peter first met Jesus, he was actually not Peter. He was Simon. Jesus told him, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Peter (or rock in Greek).” Jesus wanted Peter to be the rock on which he was going to build the church. Jesus had such great hope for this average fisherman. What did Jesus see in him anyway? One thing is Peter was a man of passion and heart. Just before Jesus’ death, he confidently proclaimed, “I will lay down my life for you.” Peter really loved Jesus and he meant this with all his heart. Peter wanted to love Jesus and give to Jesus and serve Jesus. But he didn’t want to be served by Jesus. This was evident the night before Jesus’ death, when Jesus went around and washed everyone’s feet. Peter would not let him wash his feet because he should wash Jesus’ feet! But Jesus said to him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” After his bold claim to die for Jesus, he failed to stand up for him, and instead denied him three. He must have been plagued with a sense of failure and the guilt of disowning Jesus not once, not twice, but three times.

Even after Jesus death and resurrection and even though Jesus shows his love for the disciples by appearing to them after his resurrection, Peter went back to his old profession as an average fishermen. Perhaps Peter was so distraught by his failure that he felt that he did not deserve to be Jesus’ disciple anymore and he might as well go back to being an average fisherman. To feel like even more of a failure, we see in verse 3 that they caught nothing!

Feeling like a failure or the fear of failure is not a good feeling to have. Our sense of self-worth and confidence is tied closely with this feeling. If we fail at something, we can feel worthless and unworthy. We are expected to get grades at school, do well at our jobs, be a good spouse, be good parents, be good friends, be loyal friends, and many more. When we don’t meet the expectations, especially with those we love, this feeling of worthlessness and unworthiness is much greater, just like Peter might have felt.

But Jesus was different and we can see this starting from verse 4.

Look at verses 4-6. Jesus was on the shore and he called out to the disciples, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?” Isn’t this amazing? These disciples had deserted him and abandoned all that they had been taught by him. Just in the previous chapter, the risen Jesus had appeared to them, but they still did not get what Jesus was all about. Jesus wasn’t standing on the shore with his arms crosses and tapping his toe like a father waiting to scold his children for making trouble. Instead, he called them as friends. Instead, he helped them to catch so much fish that they were not able to haul the net. Jesus started to shower them with love. Jesus was going to restore them from their sense of failure and give them a new start. Like the first time they were called, this catch of fish was as if Jesus was calling them all over again to become fishers of men.

Look at verses 7 and 8. When John recognized Jesus, he said, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say this, he wrapped his outer garment around him and jumped into the water. This is kind of funny. People usually take their clothes off to jump into the water, but Peter did the opposite. He didn’t want to appear before Jesus half naked. But the real question is, why didn’t he just get to shore by boat like everyone else? Why did he have to jump into the water and swim to shore to get there 30 seconds ahead of everyone else? But this was Peter. He was all heart. Despite his failures and shortcomings, Peter really did love and respect Jesus.

Let’s all read verses 9 and 10 together. “When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” Not only does Jesus help them catch a boatload of fish (Pun intended), he is cooking for them! After struggling and spending all their energy all night, they must have been really hungry. What a warm, unexpected welcome!

Now Look at verses 12-14. Jesus first said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Then Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. I like to picture them sitting around the warm fire, warming their hands, wondering in bewilderment what is happening, but at the same time, enjoying the wonderful fellowship with their beloved Lord and teacher, talking and laughing and just catching up. I think it is really a beautiful image.

How do we view Jesus? How should we view Jesus? Do we see Jesus always appearing on the shore, calling us friends, and waiting for us with warm breakfast? Or is he more like a critical boss, who can never be pleased? Do we find comfort and renewal in his love? Or do we feel judged by him, like we’re a disappointment to him?

The grace of God through Jesus was on fully display to the disciples here. Jesus’ unconditional, unfailing love was on full display. Jesus humbled himself again by cooking breakfast for the disciples. Through his love, Jesus was restoring their broken relationship with him. Likewise, let us see Jesus as one who keeps showing up on the shore with infinite love and grace, inviting us to breakfast, as our good shepherd. Jesus, who is the same yesterday and today and forever, wants us to taste this love. [Exodus 15:13] says, “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.” [Jeremiah 31:3] says, “The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”

When I look at my 15-month old son Eliot and think about how much I love him, this is how I feel Jesus loves me. He is helpless and can't do anything practical, but I love him no matter what. In the same way, Jesus loves me no matter what, even when I’m helpless to him. I pray that we can taste the unfailing love of Jesus.

**Part II. Having a Tangible and Real Love Relationship with God (as Jesus lays down the truth on Peter)**

After the disciples soaked up all that love from Jesus, Jesus turned to his top disciple. It was time for Peter to be honest with himself and honest with Jesus.

Let’s read verses 15-17. “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

Usually when people ask the question, “Do you love me?” it’s asked with a great focus on the self. “He loves me not, He loves, She loves me not, she loves me.” But Jesus is not asking this question in that way. Notice how Jesus shortens his question each time he asks. Also, notice that the first 2 times the word love is used, it is translated from the Greek word for love ‘agape’, which is sacrificial love. When Jesus asks the third time, the word love is translated from the word referring to ‘phileo’ love, which is friend love. So by the third time Jesus asks, Jesus is basically asking if Peter is even his friend. Ouch. So in asking this question, “Do you love me,” and in asking it three times, Jesus was serving Peter, loving Peter by challenging Peter. How so?

Before Jesus asked this question, Peter must have been asking himself this question many times – “Do I really love Jesus?” because he had failed him three times before. And he would keep asking it for many years to come. But Jesus looked at Peter and asked “Do you love me?” three times because it was for Peter and to help Peter. He was giving Peter a chance to tell him directly, “Yes, I love you,” for each time he denied him. Jesus wanted Peter to know, “Ok. I accept it. I believe it. I forgive you.” Jesus was restoring Peter from a sense of failure, so that he may be freed from guilt and deeply, deeply feel forgiven.

Now let’s look at Peter’s response.

Peter responded the first two times, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” The last time, he was hurt that Jesus asked him a third time, and said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Peter couldn’t claim any more – “I’ll show you, Jesus!” He could only say, “You know that I love you. I don’t know how I can prove it to you now. But you know all things. You know that I love you.” For the first time, he was throwing himself at Jesus as one who had no power to love Jesus perfectly – but only as one who was loved. He was letting Jesus feed him warm breakfast. He was letting Jesus love him. He was letting Jesus love the imperfect him. Like John, he was saying, “I’m a disciple whom Jesus loves.”

When our guilt replaces the grace of God, we are fixed on ourselves. When we look down on ourselves or punishing ourselves for the bad things that we do or think about, this is all pride and self-centeredness. But we need to accept the grace of God. [1 John 4:10] says “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” We have to let Jesus love us. We have to let ourselves be forgiven by Jesus. When the grace of God replaces our guilt, we are free people. We are free from our guilt, free from our sins. We’re free from ourselves because our need to be loved and accepted is found so perfectly in Jesus. Then you know what happens? We don’t have to think about ourselves anymore.

Now let’s look at Jesus’ response.

Each time Peter replied, “You know that I love you,” Jesus said, “Feed may lambs; Take care of my sheep; Feed my sheep.” Jesus was telling Peter, “Peter, I love you. I know you love me. So now go love other people. Take care of my sheep.” This was what Jesus had been doing the last three years. Jesus was helping them put their faith in him and grow as shepherds for God’s flock. “Take care of my sheep.” This was the truth that Jesus plainly told Peter.

*And these words teaches us how to have a tangible and real love relationship with God.*  [1 John 4:11-12] says “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” We experience more of his love when we love others. Loving others is not an extra thing. It is receiving God’s love and loving God. If we keep following Jesus, if we keep growing in his love, we will love Jesus’ sheep and shepherd them. That’s what Jesus’ love does to us. It makes us like him. “Take care of my sheep” is not a command, but something that we want to do out of love and because it compels us to do so. [1 Peter 5:2-3] says, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” [2 Co 5:14,15] 14 For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. We each must grow as shepherds, because it is growing to be like Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Shepherds, simply speaking, think about sheep. If we’re always thinking about ourselves all time … “What does that person think of me?” “Am I respected?” “Why does that person look at me like that?” … then we need to ask Jesus to make us more like him. Jesus, Our Almighty God, served people his entire life. That’s what it means to be a shepherd. We usually want to receive, receive, receive. People want to take, take, take. So again, in the simplest sense, shepherding is thinking about others from Jesus’ point of view.

Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep.” How do we do that? What does that look like? Well, they’re Jesus’ sheep. We need to shepherd them like Jesus would. Think about how Jesus never gave up on Peter. Think about how Jesus shepherded Peter not only on the surface level but deeply and personally. Jesus didn’t let Peter sink deeper and deeper into his guilt. Jesus helped him face his failure head on and find real resolution in his love and grace. To take care of Jesus’ sheep looks like this. It is to love them deeply; to help them open their hearts to Jesus, so that he may bring about healing and change. And we can do this anytime and anyone can do it.

For the last 3 years, my life has been very challenging in many ways. I’ve had to juggle a 2-3 hour 70 mile commute every day to and from work and work with a very demanding boss. During this time, I have been attending graduate school in downtown Chicago, which increased my commute to about 80 miles a week and added an extra 10 to 15 hours of school time. Then in the middle of it all, Eliot was born, I started a new job, and continued to do church treasurer duties. Also in the middle of it all, I studied the bible with one student friend for almost 3 years now on a regular basis. So some days and weeks were very tiring and I really did not want to go study the bible, honestly, but I did. I’m not sharing this to boast about my busy life, but I’m sharing this because I could not help want to share the gospel with him. I was compelled to share Jesus’ love to him. It was also because he was so eager and genuine to want to learn about God and Jesus. He would soak up God’s word like a sponge and it made me so happy. It made me so happy to see his genuine desire to know Jesus and gave me strength to be committed no matter what. Thank God!

I mentioned in the beginning that having a profound love relationship with God, who we cannot see or talk face-to-face, seem very abstract and difficult. Well, as we learned in today’s passage, it can be as tangible and real as we want it to be. First, let’s ask ourselves, do we let Jesus shepherd us and let Jesus shepherd us in our deepest wounds? If we open our hearts and our whole selves to him just as we are, Jesus comes in lovingly and with compassion and he heals us. He makes us healthy and strong, like he did for Peter. Second, do we shepherd one another as Jesus did for us? Do we love each other deeply that we learn to pray for each other for deep inner healing? Shepherding may look different for each of us, but we do it because Jesus loves us and loving him back makes us think about other people more and more. May God help us to deeply understand and experience Jesus’ love, so that we are compelled to share Jesus’s love with others.