

This summer, I have been preaching through a sermon series entitled “Meeting Jesus,” looking at various interactions that Jesus had with people in the gospel of John, in order to learn more about what it means to know and follow Jesus. Next week is the final week in the series, and for this week and next week, I will be looking at two interactions that Jesus had after he was raised from the dead: this week with Peter, and next week with Thomas.

Peter was a particularly passionate and devoted disciple of Jesus, and you may remember that at the last supper, when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to be killed and that they would all abandon him, Peter had a particularly strong reaction to that:

John 13:36-38 - *Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!*

After he finishes sharing the last supper with his disciples, Jesus goes out with his disciples to the Mt. of Olives. There, Jesus is betrayed by Judas, and arrested by the religious leaders. As Jesus is being abused, Peter denies three times that he knows Jesus, and goes away weeping bitterly, **crushed by his cowardice**. Eventually, Jesus is put on trial, sentenced to death, and crucified by the Roman authorities. But after three days in the grave, he rises again from the dead.

The last days of Jesus’ life are full of spectacular failures on the part of Peter. But in John 21, after Jesus’ resurrection, we find a beautiful exchange between Jesus and Peter that teaches us a lot about how God handles our sins and failures. If you’ve lived on this earth long enough, you are familiar with failure, with hurting others, with falling short of God’s will for your life or your own goals for your own life. You know what it is like to go back on your word, to fail to do what God has called you to do, to put your own interests first and injure a friend or family member. As we look at this passage, I want to take a close look at **four things I believe are missing from this passage** and how they help us answer the question of how God handles our failures.

John 21:1-19 - *Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go*

with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. ⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. ⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, 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." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

So what are the four things missing from this passage?

The first thing that doesn't happen in this passage is that Peter doesn't disqualify himself. He doesn't give up. Now that's not to say he wasn't close to giving up. We know from this chapter that Peter had gone back fishing, which is what he used to do before Jesus had called him to follow him. Peter was surely devastated by his betrayal of Jesus, and so he naturally went back to the one thing he knew how to do – fishing. But despite Peter's despair, he hasn't given up. We know this because he is still there, unlike **Judas**. Judas is the treasurer of the group, and betrays

Jesus, selling him out for 30 pieces of silver. Matthew 27 tells us what happens to him:

Matthew 27:3-5 - When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." ⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Judas, like Peter, is also seized with remorse at how he has failed Jesus, but the guilt is so heavy upon Judas that he ends up killing himself. If you have ever considered suicide, you understand the feelings of hopelessness, that nothing good can come out of the mistakes you have made, that there is no hope left, that the world would be a better place if you were not in it. Peter is still there, and still wants to spend time with Jesus. So the first thing we learn from this passage is that when you fail, don't give up. Don't disqualify yourself. As we are going to see, there is always hope. You are never out of the reach of God's grace. There is hope even in the midst of the worst failures. There is nothing so bad that God can not bring good out of it. Keep walking, one step at a time, staying open to God's grace. Hang on to these critical verses:

1 John 1:9 – *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

When we fail, the temptation to give up can be strong. But God is a gracious God, who forgives even the worst sins, and not only that, works everything together for our good. Even our failures, in His capable hands, can be a tool to shape us more and more into the image of Christ. **When you fail, don't disqualify yourself.**

So remember our question - how does God handle our failures? Well, what else is missing from this passage? The first thing is that we should not disqualify ourselves when we fail, just as Peter did not disqualify himself. The second thing missing from the passage is that **Jesus never says that Peter's failure is no big deal.** Maybe some of you are the "no big deal" type. I know I am. When I was a

youth pastor, I had a couple of 300 pound guys in my group that broke countless number of things in my house. By my account, the broken items included fifteen folding chairs, a couch, two windows, a closet door, a spatula, and the struts in my car. But every time, my response would be, “oh, don’t worry about it. It’s no big deal.” But Jesus doesn’t say that, because Jesus isn’t like me. He doesn’t say that, because Peter’s failure was a big deal. Sin and failure are always a big deal to God. **We know that Jesus takes it seriously by the question he asks Peter and the way he asks him.** He asks Simon Peter whether he loves him. Because the truth is that there was reason to doubt that love. At the last supper, Peter had said he loved Jesus, but his actions on the night of Jesus’ betrayal showed otherwise. So Jesus asks Peter, do you love me? Do you really love me? And look at how Jesus asks Peter – **he calls him, Simon son of John.** Peter’s original name was Simon, but the nickname Peter means “rock.” However, Peter’s actions had proven that he was no rock, that he wasn’t sturdy and steadfast in his commitment. So Jesus takes away the nickname and calls him by his original name – Simon, son of John, do you love me?

So what do we learn from the fact that Jesus never says that Peter’s failure is no big deal? We learn that **sin is always a big deal**, and our failure is never a small thing to God. It’s a big deal because it is a slap in God’s face. It’s us telling God that we don’t need him, that we’ve got a better way, or that we’ve got something more important than him. It is spiritual adultery, cheating on the one who loves us enough to die for us. It’s a big deal because our failure breaks our relationship with God, and the only way God could bring us back was to send his son to **die in our place**, to take the penalty that our sin deserved. **How could Peter’s sin not be a big deal to Jesus? He had only been out of the grave for a few days!** His death on Peter’s behalf was fresh in his mind. The point is that our failure is always a big deal to God. **Your sin is something Jesus had to die for, something that has hurt others. It does you no good to downplay it. How does God handle our failure? He takes it seriously.**

So what else is missing from this passage? We know that Peter did not disqualify himself, and Jesus did not brush it off as no big deal. **The third thing that is missing is that Jesus never brings up Peter’s failure.** It must have been on Peter’s mind, but Jesus never brings it up. He never says, “Peter, by the way, didn’t I tell you that you would betray me? You’re not as strong as you thought, are you?” **Instead, he asks Peter the same question three times - “Do you love me?”** And I think it’s fascinating what happens. Jesus’ questions are like a knife that cuts to Peter’s heart and reveals Peter’s love for Jesus. He asks him three times, one for each denial. And by the end, Peter realizes that he really does love

Jesus; by the third question he realizes that Jesus, **who knows all things**, knows it too! Peter realizes that despite his failures, despite his imperfections, he really does love his Lord Jesus. And Jesus, by asking those three questions, shows Peter “I do know your heart, Peter, and I know you love me. And yes, you failed me, and you will fail me again, but **I know your heart, and I know that you love me.**” How freeing that must have been for Peter. Without even bringing up his betrayal, Jesus has extended a deep forgiveness and understanding to his wounded disciple. It reminds me of Romans 2:4, where Paul writes that it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance.

It’s incredible – Jesus does not highlight how Peter has broken God’s law and how he needs to repent. He goes after His heart, to see if Peter truly loves Jesus more than anything else. Because that love is going to be what strengthens and motivates Him. The answer for us in our failure is not in dwelling on our sin and trying to overcome it, but in loving and pursuing Jesus above everything else.

There’s one more thing that is missing from this passage, and it’s something you need to let sink deeply into your hearts and never leave. We’ve already learned that when we fail, we shouldn’t disqualify ourselves, and that God takes our failure very seriously but forgives us, revealing our love for him. But, praise God, there’s one more thing missing from the passage: **Jesus doesn’t disqualify Peter**. Jesus had every right to look at Peter and say, “Simon Peter, I gave you a position of leadership, and you have proven that you are unworthy to follow me. Please leave, and do not come back.” He could have said, “Peter, you can keep following, but it will take some time before I can trust you again.” But thank God that our Lord is not like that. Instead, he restores Peter to a position of leadership. He tells Peter, feed my sheep – be a pastor to my people. This is infinitely beyond forgiveness as we think of it. This is complete restoration to a place of importance. Remember Peter’s bold promise at the Last Supper, that he would never deny Jesus, even if he had to die with him? Jesus even grants that wish, telling Peter that he will indeed die a death that will bring glory to God. What incredible mercy. Do not let your failures stop you from serving God and serving others. Even your failures can be a tool in God’s hands to make you more like Jesus.

****Please understand that when you fail God, there is a battle that rages over your soul.** In Luke’s account of the Last Supper, there is an amazing and bone-chilling passage: **Luke 22:31-32** - *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."* You don’t need to understand farming to understand what is going on. Peter will deny Jesus, and **Satan** wants to take that

opportunity to disqualify Peter from service. But Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed for him that his faith may not fail. The same battle is going on over you. When you fail God, Satan wants to sift you like wheat. He wants to convince you that you are no good, and that you can't go back to God. Brothers and sisters, in Jesus' name, don't listen to him! That is not the God of mercy talking. That is not the God who died for you talking. This passage shows us that when we fail God, he never disqualifies us. Yes, he takes our sin seriously, so seriously that he had to die for it. But when we are broken before him he forgives us and calls us again to his service.

Do not disqualify yourself, because God is a God of infinite forgiveness who does not disqualify you. Remember that **the Bible is not a book of morals, stories of moral examples who we should emulate.** The Bible is a record of God working in the lives of people who don't deserve it, resist it, and still don't get it after they're saved. He uses screw-ups, people who get it wrong and can not live up to the calling on their lives, who sin and sin again and even when they promise to do it differently this time, sin yet again. God delights in taking failures, people like Peter who have let him down, and using them to build his kingdom. Why? **Because people like Peter are humble.** They realize that they are no better than anyone else. They know that in their own power they will fail, and they know that they need God. That's why God loves to use people who screw up. So when you fail, don't disqualify yourself. **He will take all your sin and failure and use it to make you into a humble servant who relies on His power.** When you fail, remember that God knows your heart – he knows you love him, and he has already forgiven you through the death of his son. Fall on his mercy, and let him restore you to his service.

I'd like to finish by telling you a story. When I was in college, I always found myself feeling depressed and discouraged at the end of every school year. Every year, I came into the fall with high hopes of sharing the love of Jesus with the people on my floor, and every spring I looked back at failure after failure, missed opportunity after missed opportunity. I felt like I hadn't made any difference at all. At the end of my senior year, this feeling of discouragement was worse. Here I was, leaving UConn, and what difference had I made? How many lives of my unbelieving friends had been changed by my witness? I truly felt like I had failed God.

After exams were over, most of the campus was empty, except for the seniors. One day, as I was walking across campus, I was stopped by a young woman who

explained that she was with the Daily Campus, and wanted to ask me a question for Husky Talk. Now, the Daily Campus is the school newspaper, and Husky Talk is the first thing every student reads when they open up the newspaper. Husky Talk consists of one question, such as “What are you doing for spring break?” or “what’s the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever done?”, and three students give their short one sentence answers. The answers are usually weak attempts at humor and tend to be full of sexual innuendo, but every day we’d open up to the paper to see if someone we knew was in Husky Talk. In my four years I had never been interviewed for Husky Talk... until now.

I told the woman that I would be glad to answer her question, and she explained that this was for the graduation edition of the Daily Campus, which would be given to every graduating senior and every family and friend that came to graduation later that week. The question she asked me was, “Now that you are graduating, what do you hope to do with your life?” I stepped back and thought. Whatever I said was going to be read by thousands of people in a few days. What did I want to say? I thought of something funny to say, and then I thought of the truth. I knew that all I really wanted to do with my life was to serve God, to love him and to love those around me. But could I say that? Could I really put myself out there like that? I thought it over, tried to find a way out of it or something funny that would still be sort of true, but I knew what I had to say. “OK, I’ve got it,” I said. “I want to love God with all I am and love those around me.” “That’s it?” she said. “That’s it,” I said. “All right... thanks,” she said, wrote it down, and turned to leave. I walked back to my dorm, feeling very exposed, but also a nervous excitement. I felt like God was redeeming my mistakes and was giving me the opportunity to tell the whole campus that I loved him.

Well, the day of graduation came, and I went to the site where graduation would take place. The paper hadn’t come out yet, and I was so nervous that I could hardly sit still. Finally, as we were sitting in our seats, I saw some people looking through the newspaper, and I asked someone if I could borrow their paper. I opened to the middle, and looked at the Husky Talk. There was the question – “Now that you are graduating, what are you hoping to do?” Six people had been interviewed and given answers – some serious, about becoming a lawyer or working with animals, and some attempts at humor, like one guy who wanted to follow Van Halen around. But as I looked over the replies, I didn’t see mine. She had left mine out. Part of me felt relief, that I hadn’t been exposed. But part of me was truly disappointed. And as I sat there thinking about it, I thought of Jesus sitting with Peter after his resurrection. Peter had felt like a failure, just like I had, and Jesus had asked him, do you love me? And Peter had replied from his heart,

“Lord, you know I love you.” And I realized what had happened. That interview wasn’t for other people to hear. It was for me to hear. In the midst of my failure, the Lord had asked me, “Eric, do you love me?” And in doing that he had revealed my heart. I did love him. I do love him. And I will always love him.

What do you hear in your heart when God asks you “do you love me?” What is revealed in there? Do you hear “well, I think you’re a good teacher and you help me when I pray to you”? **That’s not the question** – “do you love me?” “Well, I don’t want to go to Hell, and you’re better than the alternatives.” That’s not the question – “do you love me?” “But I’ve failed you so many times.” That’s not the question – “do you love me?” What is revealed when He asks your heart that question? Do you know him? Do you know his love? Or is there just confusion, or something else in there? If you love him, know that He knows all things and he knows that beneath your sin and failure and mixed motives and misplaced affection, he knows you love him, and His forgiveness is over you. But if you do not have that love in your heart, then cry out to him and ask him for that kind of relationship, that kind of love, because that is what this faith is all about. It is about loving God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. If you do not know that, draw near to God, confess your sin and your lack of love, and ask him to give that love to you.