



## Leader Corner

Feed My Sheep

John 21:15-23

This scene is remarkable because modern sensibilities might argue it didn't need to happen. For example, one might say: sure, Peter denied knowing Jesus 3 times. But that was in a highly stressful, uncertain scenario, and we all make mistakes, right? Plus, that was days/weeks ago. Since then, Jesus was raised! And as soon as he heard, Peter threw caution to the wind and ran to the tomb! Surely this indicates he was fully back onboard, and his denials were just a momentary blunder, right? After all, he's still hanging out with the rest of the disciples, so it's not like they held a traitorous grudge against him and kicked him out of the group. Besides, the resurrected Jesus had already appeared to them a couple times (Lk 24:36, Jn 20:19, 26) and didn't draw negative attention to Peter by saying, "What's that guy who denied me still doing here?" Based on the exciting, joyful series of events that followed Jesus' resurrection, and Peter's participation in them, we'd be justified in thinking everyone was willing to brush that whole denial incident under the rug and just move forward. Let bygones be bygones! Jesus is risen! Things can go back to the way they were! Right? Evidently not, because in this passage, John records an incredible public restoration of Peter that Jesus apparently believed was vitally necessary. In this study, you'll explore why.

**Main Idea:** When a leader fails, a public restoration process is critical because the standard for leadership in Jesus' church is higher.

**Main Practice:** Christians can't just blow past breeches of trust that damage relationships and pretend like everything is fine. We must confront and address failures, not brush them under the rug. This is especially crucial for church leadership, where both sincere repentance *and* formal restoration are important before a leader can resume that role.

**Main Teaching:** John 21:15-19

## Refocus with Praise

Look up the worship song "Build My Life" and listen / worship / or read the lyrics as a group.

## with Prayer

Have someone in your group pray the following Scripture, and then read John 21:15-19 aloud:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. – Psalm 51:10-12, ESV*

The 3 confessions Jesus requires of Peter are clearly intended to counteract Peter's previous 3 denials, thereby allowing him to be fully restored. And by the 3rd question, Peter surely understood what was happening, and why there had to be 3 questions. But this scene is about more than simply forgiveness; it's about a formal public restoration to leadership, and a new commissioning to take action.

1. After the miracle of the fish (Jn 21:6), they enjoyed a time of joyful fellowship and finished breakfast before Jesus turned to more serious matters. Why do you think Jesus did this? Why not jump right into Peter's restoration? What does it tell us about Jesus that he conducted that morning's events in this order?
2. For context, read Mt 26:33, Mk 14:29, and Jn 13:37. Then back in Jn 21:15, Jesus' first question to Peter includes the phrase "more than these," referring to the disciples. In essence, Jesus is asking: "Peter, do you still think you love me the most?" Jesus already knew the answer to this, of course. So why do you think he asks Peter this question? And what do you make of Peter's answer?
3. After the 3rd question, Peter's reaction is described using the Greek word *lupeo*, which ESV translates as 'grieved' in verse 17. The heart of this word means 'sad' or 'sorrowful,' and gives insight to how Peter was really feeling. He wasn't annoyed or confused that Jesus kept asking, nor was he afraid or nervous that Jesus didn't believe him; rather, he was simply...sad. Peter knew exactly what Jesus was doing, and this threefold line of questioning was a clear and painful reminder of his threefold denial. Why do you think Jesus did it this way, surely knowing it would be uncomfortable and painful for Peter? Is he just trying to make Peter feel bad? How do pain, grief, and discomfort play a role in the restoration process?
4. But Jesus' tactics don't stop with grief; they also include a motivating commission toward the future that is connected to the re-establishment of Peter's leadership role. Interestingly, the Greek is different in each of Jesus' three commands. First is *bosko mou arnion* (feed my lambs), then *poimaino mou probaton* (tend/shepherd my sheep), and finally, *bosko mou probaton* (feed my sheep), which is a combination of the 1st and 2nd questions. What do you think Jesus meant by these directions? What is he commissioning Peter to do? And what's the connection between Jesus' questions and these commissions?
5. Jesus seems to accept Peter's confessions. But then he lays out the hard truth that his road ahead will be painful. When he is old, Peter will be taken against his will, bound, and crucified himself. Jesus leaves no room for doubt, either. Starting with "Truly truly, I say to you" (a familiar phrase Jesus has used in the past when he *really* wants to emphasize something) is a sign to Peter that this fate is assured. "So eyes wide open, knowing this will happen to you Peter, are you still in? If so, follow me." Why do you think Jesus ended Peter's restoration process this way? Given what Peter had done before, how would you describe the importance of Jesus being clear about the future before finalizing Peter's restoration?
6. The public nature of this episode is vital. This difficult question-and-answer wasn't only about Peter being restored, it was also about the rest of the disciples hearing it. Why was that so important?
7. What are your summary thoughts on Jesus' decision to conduct Peter's restoration in this way? What is impactful and powerful about it? What lessons can we learn from it about how to restore leaders after they have failed?
8. Discuss any other key, biblically-based teaching points you recall from the weekend's sermon.

Some commentators have noticed that Jesus asks Peter about his love in this passage, not his repentance. One writes, "We might have expected Jesus to say, Simon, are you sorry for what you did? Will you promise never to do it again? But no! Instead, Jesus asks for a heart of love, knowing when that is given, the rest will follow." That sounds nice, and "it'll preach," as they say. But it would be misleading to conclude that the focus on love implies Peter's repentance was somehow unnecessary or less important. Rather, Peter's repentance was critical, and by the time we get to John 21:15, *he has already done it* (Mt 26:75, Mk 14:72, Lk 22:61-62). Since that repentance has happened, the time for demanding apologies and making him swear he won't do it again is also past. Now we've reached his public restoration-to-leadership ceremony, so to speak, and *that* calls for a different approach, which is what you discussed in this study. But this is a good opportunity to serve your group by emphasizing the importance of repentance. If your group is dealing with broken relationships, the process shown here and elsewhere in Scripture is not that you can just "go straight to love and pretend the bad things didn't happen." Rather, there needs to be repentance and reconciliation before any sort of true restoration can be expected.

## For Further Focus

Repentance can be made *and* there can also still be earthly consequences. In Peter's case, he'll be a leader in the new church, but it'll end in painful crucifixion. Similarly, consider King Saul. After his failure to obey God (1 Sam 15:10), he repented (15:24), but he still faced the consequence of having the kingdom taken from him (15:28). Or consider David. After his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:9), he repented (12:13, Ps 51), but still faced the consequence of continuous battle, losing his wives, and the death of his son (12:10-11, 14). After an apology, people can have a tendency to quickly want things to go back to normal. But there's a difference between forgiveness and restoration. Just because a leader repents and receives forgiveness after a failure doesn't mean they automatically get to resume their previous role of leadership. You may not just get to say sorry and get your old job back. The relationship can be made right without the role being returned. On this point, a good area of deeper study would be to examine other Bible characters (like Saul, David, and many others) who were forgiven but still lost their positions and/or faced consequences.