

“Love, the Most Important Priority”

John 21:12-17 (NRSV)

In the 1930s a man named **Ivy Lee**, a management consultant and an aggressive and self-confident man, by stealth wangled a private interview with **Charles Schwab**, then president of Bethlehem Steel, who was no less self-assured, being one of the most powerful businessmen in the world.

During the conversation, Lee asserted that if the entire management team of Bethlehem Steel would follow his advice, the company’s operations would be improved and their profits increased. Schwab responded, “Mr. Lee, if you can show us a way to get more things done, I’ll be glad to listen; and if it works, I’ll pay you whatever you ask within reason.” Lee then handed Schwab a blank piece of paper and said, “**Write down the most important things you have to do tomorrow.**” Schwab did so. “Now,” Lee continued, “number them in order of importance.” Schwab did so. Lee added, “Tomorrow morning start on #1 and stay with it until you complete it. Then go on to #2 and #3 and #4 and so on. Don’t worry if you haven’t completed everything by the end of the day. At least you’ll have completed the most important projects. Do this every day. After you’ve been convinced of the value of this system, have your managers try it. Try it as long as you like, and then,” concluded Lee, “send me your cheque for whatever you think the idea is worth.”

This was **a very simple idea indeed**, and I doubt that it was original to Lee. It might well have been practiced by the Babylonian satraps, or by various administrative officials in the Roman Empire, or even by some medieval monks in some monastery. At any rate, a few weeks later, Charles Schwab sent Ivy Lee a cheque for \$25,000 – an astronomical amount of money to be giving away during the depressed days of the thirties. But he said it was “the most profitable lesson [he’d] ever learned” in his long business career! In the cold, hard business world there are few lessons more important than learning **how to prioritize and how to live by those priorities**.

On a much higher level, how well we Christians learn to recognize and maintain **spiritual priorities** will bear incalculable consequences for our entire lives here on earth and for eternity. Sadly, some have never given a thought to life’s priorities. Others have, but have chosen the wrong priorities. Still others have the correct priorities in perspective but do not have the self-control or wisdom or whatever to live by them.

1. A good scene for setting priorities (John 21:12-14).

In John's Gospel 21:12-17 we have **a picture of our Lord setting the matter straight for Peter**, and for all who seek to be faithful participants in his church.

As the curtain lifts, **the backdrop** is the morning-lit Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. **In the foreground** is a rocky pebble beach with a glowing fire and some fish frying on the fire. There is bread and some wine on a rocky table. **The principal characters** in this true-life drama are Jesus Christ, Peter and six other disciples, gathered around the fire, some standing and some sitting.

The key to understanding what is about to transpire is an appreciation for **what Peter's inner feelings must have been like**, for while he'd made the greatest confession in church history: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), he had also misunderstood what he was saying, and he had denied his Lord three times just after Jesus' arrest in the garden. How the mighty had fallen!

In the wake of the denial, Peter's Master had been brought out from the inner chamber where he was being interrogated, and for a moment their eyes locked on to each other. Oh, the agony of that shameful moment when, with the echoes of the rooster still ringing in the early morning air, Jesus' unblinking, guiltless, omniscient eyes had looked into the heart of Peter. Peter went out and cried. What else could he do? But his tears couldn't wash the image from his mind. He'd never forget the awful thing he'd done. He'd denied his Lord. He'd disappointed his Lord. He'd failed in his discipleship. The thought must have occurred to him a hundred times: could he ever again be what he'd been before?

All this was now firmly lodged in Peter's psyche. Sure, he'd seen the risen Christ, and had heard the comforting benediction announcing his presence: "Peace be with you!" But **Peter couldn't forget his lapse of love**. Had he not disqualified himself now from fruitful service? Would his heart ever know peace again? How could he find restoration in his broken world?

All this is the setting for setting new priorities. Peter and John, and some of the other disciples had traveled eighty miles north to old, familiar haunts in Galilee **to take some time to sort things out and to seek recuperation** from the recent events.

The fishing was therapeutic with its familiar wind, sea and sky. The miracle of **the catch of fish**, thanks to their Saviour's presence on shore, **was even more therapeutic**. And now a dripping Peter stood before the Lord after his fully-clothed plunge and frantic swim to the Master, another impulsive demonstration of the apostle's love. But Peter still wasn't all better. His tank was still leaking, and leaking badly. His past, present and future confronted him. He'd failed his Lord, even denying he knew him! He doubted his own fidelity, his own ability to walk with Christ or to minister to others. He wondered if he could ever be used again. He needed a healing touch from Jesus' hand and a kind, affirming voice from Jesus' lips, as we all do, from time to time.

God has used this text to touch many of his sons and daughters. I have personally found it to be one of the most helpful and healing passages of Scripture because it takes me back to the ground of my faith, it helps me to assess where I really am, and it instructs me on how to set my life and my priorities straight once more.

The breakfast of fish, bread and, perhaps some wine, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias evokes **a timeless, ethereal picture** – the risen Lord with his back to the glistening blue morning sea, serving breakfast on the beach to his damp crew of disciples, while ancient, re-covenanting smoke wafted between them. Verse 12 hints that there was very little conversation. After all “it [was] the Lord” who was in the midst of them. What were they going to say? Who was going to speak first? When would he bring up the past? The supernatural pervaded everything. It was an awkwardly silent breakfast – not like the men's breakfasts I have known – as they huddled together around the fire, gazing hesitantly, uncertainly at their Lord, as the morning mists rose from the Sea of Tiberias.

2. **Peter's restoration** (John 21:15-17).

Finally, breakfast was finished, and **Jesus spoke**. Peter's heart must have been thumping and it skipped a beat when he heard the Lord's words as recorded in verse 15: **“Simon, son of John, do you [truly] love me more than these?”** (21:15a). The Lord was asking, “Simon, do you truly love me?” “After all that has happened -- and you know what I mean -- can you truly say you love me?” “And, because you always like to do things better than others, do you really love me **more** than these other disciples do?”

John doesn't say **what ran through Peter's mind** at these words, but from our own experience in facing our own failures we can just imagine what was going on. His heart probably began to race, his stomach churned, his cheeks burned, and his eyes must have misted over. It was **a tense moment**. But, it was also **a healing moment**, because Jesus was speaking the language of love; he was speaking about the priority of love. It was all about restoring their previous relationship of love.

Jesus wasn't speaking harshly, but **his words were calculated to gently bring Peter to account**. There are several reasons for this. Jesus had addressed him as "Simon, son of John," which was his name before he met Christ. The way the Lord addressed him now intentionally called into question his title of "Peter, the Rock." His personal message was: "Peter do you remember your human weakness?" "Do you remember what you were like before I met you?" **The question**, though motivated by love, **was calculated to be surgically incisive**, to pinpoint and to cut out Peter's all-too-quick ability to brag, and to deeply heal this wound. Jesus also asked him if he loved him "more" than all the other disciples did. Surely, at this, Peter couldn't help but recall how he had once thoughtlessly and boldly-facedly said, "Though all become deserters, ..., I will never desert you" (Matt. 26:33). "I'll be the one to stick with you!" Yeah right!

Furthermore, **the fire on the beach** must have undoubtedly reminded Peter of the one he'd warmed himself at that morning he had denied his Lord. His thoughts were probably a torrent of emotion – the painful aroma of the fire, the same unblinking, innocent eyes, the repetition of phrases like: "more than these," "I will never fall away," "do you love me?" The Lord's words were **mercifully direct**. And as he was saying all this, he was also implying, **"Peter, I love you!"** Otherwise, why did Jesus bother talking to Peter at all? He could have ignored him or told him to go away.

How would Peter answer? "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" (21:15b). Interestingly enough, the word that Peter used here in his reply is different than our text suggests. It should be translated, "Yes, Lord, you know I have a deep personal attachment, or affection for you." He couldn't bring himself to profess a full and unreserved love. He couldn't bring himself to say, "You know that I love you" after he considered all his disgraceful action that morning of Jesus' trials. The moment was like the one that finally dawned upon the prodigal son, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired hands" (Lk. 15:19).

Peter's blustering, bragging, me-first presumption is gone. Then the Lord lovingly, graciously gives Peter what is his rightful task and priority as a faithful disciple, **"Feed my lambs"** (21:15c). In other words, "Everything's all right now, serve me, in serving others."

Jesus wasn't through, so **he asks him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"** (21:16a). That is, "Simon, dropping all comparisons now, the question is still, do you really love me? That is the bottom line." We can be sure there was little movement as the smoke wafted among the apostolic band. Peter, carefully and quietly, answered as he had answered previously, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love [or have an affection for] you" (21:16b). Some would criticize Peter's answer, but Paul reminds us that **the love of friendship is, indeed, a great love** (1 Cor.16:22). And, after all, didn't Jesus call his disciples his "friends" (Jn. 15:14-15)? Again Jesus' gentle, repetitively loving response was **"Tend my sheep"** (21:16c).

There is stark honesty in the Lord's questioning, but his words are gracious. Jesus was doing something wonderful for Peter. **By asking him yet another, third, time,** he was graciously and therapeutically pulling the painfully throbbing thorn of Peter's threefold denial right out of his mind and body, heart and soul. As much as Peter needed it, our Lord wanted the repetitive ache of it to go away. So he says, yet again, a third time, **"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"** (21:17a). "Do you really love me as your friend?" "Do you really have the affection for me that you have claimed?"

In his first question the Lord challenges the superiority of Peter's love. **In the second question** he challenged whether Peter had any love at all. **And now in this final question,** Jesus Christ challenges Peter's claim to affectionate love. Verse 17 says Peter "felt hurt" because Jesus questioned him the third time, but, you know what, it was good for him. Now he modestly but steadfastly is able to answer, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (21:17b). "God you know where I am and what I am; I don't dare to claim anything more than that; and, I love you as much any friend can be expected to love." It was abundantly clear that **Peter loved Jesus with the deepest of loves,** but his illusions, his presumptions about himself had had to go. Now he was honest. Now he could be real. And the Lord accepted that and said, once again, **"Feed my sheep"** (21:17c). His response displayed Jesus' deep love for his fallen apostle. It is clear that Jesus Christ knew that he could trust his sheep to Peter.

3. Complete restoration – the priority of love.

The restoration was accomplished, and they'd all seen it. And now they understood that Jesus had planned it all this way.

Further, Jesus Christ is saying to us again, through Peter's example, that **the greatest priority in life is our love for him and for each other**. Here we see a man who said he loved God with all his heart, but who needed to be reminded that love sometimes falters, and that love is a two-way street. We are to "love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart, and all [our] soul, and with all [our] mind," as well as to "love [our] neighbour as [ourselves], but **when we fail and falter in that love**, as we will, it's good to know that **God does not give up on us**. Certainly, there is **no higher priority than to love**. But there is **no better thing to know that God will love us** even when the chips are down and our love grows cool.

The inversion of life's priorities – say, to work harder, even at trying to love God or others -- is a deadly trap, especially for Christians who take their Christianity seriously. I know dutiful Christians want their lives to count; they want to do their best; they want to do something that will make a difference. But when it is all said and done **it is the love of God** that sustains us and keeps us and heals us.

I love what **C. S. Lewis** wrote,

Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love at all is to be vulnerable (The Four Loves).

That's' what Jesus' love was like – it was vulnerable; that's what Peter learned about love – **it's powerful, but it can only be vulnerable to be real**.

This is **the kind of love that lasts through thick and thin**. This is **the kind of love that transcends death**.

Let me read you a very beautiful but simple poem by **B. Kathleen Fanin** that also expresses something of this truth:

Would I have dared to love you, or perchance
have loved you less,
if I had known death's lance would end your life so soon;
if I had known you could not stay, you would not see another
dawn?

Would I have loved you less,
had I forseen the awful pain your death would bring,
the sting, the ache
that makes me ask the loneliness, "Can I go on?"

Would I have loved you less,
if I had known the price of not loving you
would be to miss the wondrous joy you brought to life;
to never know the boundless heights,
to never fly with you beyond the gates, the prison of my fear,
to never soar with you beyond imagination's door?

Would I have loved you less,
or dared have shown my love for you
at all if I had known?

And the answer of all believers, as well as of God's self in Christ is,
although here left unsaid, "No, I would not have loved you less!" "I was and
am glad to have loved you!" And "I will always love you!"

Amen

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