

Peter: Faith, Failure, Foundation

Four at the Crossroad:

John 21:15-22
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Three weeks ago Saturday, a snow storm raged while we hosted a seminar on worship. Despite the dangerous or impossible roads that prevented so many from coming, those who attended gained amazing insight into genuine worship of God. For me the finest moments came as the leader opened my eyes to the *“Too often missing ingredient in worship.”*

Most of us know that worship 1) honors God, 2) is directed toward God, and 3) requires involvement. Unless you are greater than God, worship isn't just showing up. That may work for a boss showing up at a birthday party, or a king or president attending a dinner in someone's honor, but worship of God almighty requires, in addition to your presence, some action by you that both honors God and is directed to God. Even with that there is an ingredient that is too often missing that leaves God offended and us empty of joy.

I think we glimpse this missing ingredient in the faith and failure of Peter and the foundation Christ provided him in John 21. In Matthew 26, Jesus tells his disciples:

This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” (Matthew 26:31, NIV)

Peter argues:

Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. (Matthew 26:33, NIV)

Of course, when the mob grabbed Jesus, Peter not only deserted Jesus; Peter also denied him three times. He claimed more loyalty than the others, and that claim was merely talk.

When Peter abandoned his Lord and lied about their association, he was guilty of no small sin. Consequently, he wept bitterly when he realized his sin. Jesus had told him:

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:31-32, NIV)

Unlike Judas, Peter turned back. Yet his restoration, his reconciliation was not merely personal. Peter's actions did not merely affect Jesus. They also affected other followers of Christ. When Peter lost heart, so did his brothers. His sin was a stumbling block to his brothers. It weakened their resolve. Jesus told Peter that once you turn back, you strengthen the rest.

None of us live our lives in a vacuum. We either strengthen or weaken those we live with, those we worship with, those with whom we relate. Our behavior is never neutral. If it does nothing for the person around you, it obviously isn't helpful.

I really enjoy working with children, youth and adults. I have a lot of fun. However, there are times of testing. I can watch destructive words or actions infect each age group and change everything. I think Sunday School teachers and youth leaders know exactly what I'm talking about; but these dynamics are not subtle with adults. Sometimes, I can change the way the group acts with a single word. Other times, the group is going to follow the mindset no matter what I say or do. It doesn't mean I don't have influence. It just means that my influence won't reach critical mass in the situation.

Peter could have stood for Christ, but he didn't. He deserted Christ and so did his brothers. When Jesus acted to restore him, he did something that I would have never expected.

During his resurrection appearances, Jesus personally encounters Peter on a beach and takes him back to that painful moment of boasting, asking:

Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? (John 21:15, NIV)

No longer bellicose or boastful, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I’ll stay,” Peter says:

Yes, Lord. You know I love you. (John 21:15, NIV)

Jesus told him, “*Then feed my lambs*” (John 21:15, NIV); and he repeated the question: “*Simon son of John, do you love me?*” (John 21:16, NIV) When Peter answered, “*Yes, Lord. You know I love you,*” Jesus responded: “*Then take care of my sheep.*” We then read:

A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep." (John 21:17, NIV)

Jesus restored Peter as a follower by calling him to care for the sheep. The truth is that how we treat one another is how we treat Jesus. Jesus had told his disciples that whatever they did for the least of these, they did for him; and whatever they did not do for them, they did not do for Jesus (Matthew 25:40, 44). God so allies himself with his children, that whether they are lost or found, your treatment of them is your treatment of their heavenly father.

Do you remember the story of David and his rebellious son Absalom? Absalom stole the kingdom from King David and tried to kill David. David ordered his soldiers not to harm his son, and mourned his son’s death when they did kill him. He would have preferred his own death. The Bible teaches us that this kind of love, the love that put Jesus on the cross, covers every human being on the globe.

Thus, when Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment,” he replied:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV)

I can’t think of anyone who has grown up among or around church people who doesn’t know that we are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. However, did you notice how Jesus

taught the first and greatest commandment is the love of God, “and the second is like it”? That means you cannot separate the importance of loving God and loving neighbor.

The Apostle John wrote:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20, NIV)

Our relationship with one another affects our relationship with God so profoundly that Jesus said:

Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment... anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5:22, NIV)

We’re tempted to say, “I don’t have a problem with Jesus, I don’t have a problem with God, but I do have a problem with Christians, I do have a problem with people.” That might be true, and it suggests that they also may have a problem with us and our attitude. Do people have a problem with you? Jesus concluded his statement about our anger and our insults by saying:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24, NIV)

The too often missing ingredient in our worship is exactly this. We don’t love, worship, or know God if we don’t love, forgive and reconcile with our neighbor. Jesus’ true disciples are known by their love of neighbor more than their doctrine of God.

When Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me,” he called him to feed and care for his sheep, not his cute sheep, not his clean sheep, not his intelligent sheep. I ask, “Do you love Jesus?” Then how do you treat and feed his sheep? Do you love them all? Do you feed them the mercy and love you receive? Who among us can offer our gift to God today knowing that no one has anything against us? Who of us doesn’t need to repent and confess our sin to another?