

their gifts, instead of using and developing our own. The Apostle Paul was clear that everyone is gifted and everyone must use their gift if the body of Christ is going to be healthy. If we spend our time just wishing we were gifted like her and not using our own gift, whatever it might be, then the church suffers and the kingdom's work suffers.

The third area we see this problem is with our concept of justice. We want to know why it seems life treats this person "more fairly" than it does me. Sometimes we feel cheated whether it is in regards to circumstances, possessions or just experiences. Yet, we must not spend our time comparing our self to others, but we must focus on the work God is doing in our life no matter the circumstance or experience.

We all know that an athlete who runs a race is faster and quicker to the finish line when they stay focused on the finish line. As the rise in the starting block, waiting for the gun to sound, they are thinking of their own initial thrust from the block. Once the gun sounds and they are off, they are focusing on staying in their lane and not looking to the side, but toward the finish line. One glance to the side or over the shoulder can be the difference between winning and losing.

The Apostle Paul says when we run the race of faith we are to run with our eyes fixed on the prize. We are to focus on our Lord Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. The word fixed is my problem and I am sure the problem most of us have. We glance toward God, we sometimes peek toward God, but staying fixed is the hard part. Yet, it is the key to finding God's purpose in our lives. We must not look to the lives of others, but we must look to Jesus.

It was only about 500 yards between that pond and cemetery. 500 yards from baptism to death, but they were life apart. Here it is only a few feet from the baptismal pool to where the coffin lies in a funeral. Yet, between the two is a life to be lived. God has a purpose for your life and it is to be in relationship with Jesus Christ. When you have experienced the risen Jesus then everything changes. You cannot go back to your life before Christ. You cannot live shackled by guilt. You cannot spend your time comparing yourself to another. No, once you meet Jesus everything changes and the only choice is to fix your eyes on Jesus and run your race with purpose.

<sup>1</sup>Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan ), 17-21.



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Resurrection and Purpose

John 21:15-23

Dr. Jeff Roberts

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Dr. Bill Leonard who recently retired as the Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University preached a sermon several years ago that I will never forget. The title of his sermon was "A Going Home Sermon." In essence, Dr. Leonard spent 30 minutes telling his colorful story about his 83 year old father who was facing death. His father lived in Paradise, Texas. The elder Leonard was known around Paradise for his colorful story telling. Dr. Leonard shared many of the stories with us and we all laughed with him. There is one story about how his father who had divorced and remarried a Methodist Lady. Mr. Leonard joined the Methodist church, but for several months he could not bring himself to tell his son, the Baptists Professor of Church History and now the Dean of a Baptist Divinity School. Finally, after several times of avoidance, he told his son that he had joined the Methodist Church. Then he commented "Son don't be too upset, I was not that good of a Baptist to begin with."

The final story that Dr. Leonard told in that sermon was the most interesting. He told the story of going to the cemetery with his Dad just a few months before his death. Dr. Leonard, his father and his teenage daughter stood in this rural cemetery and looked down a winding country road. Down that road was a pond about 500 yards away. As they stood there the elder Leonard told a story that Dr. Leonard had never heard. He pointed to the pond in the field and said "do you see that pond over there in that field?" The both responded "yes." "That is where I was baptized. I and several others were baptized there on a Sunday afternoon after church. Dr. Leonard, in reflecting on that moment responded after his father's death, "only 500 yards from baptism to cemetery. Only a few yards but a lifetime apart."

Only a few yards but a lifetime apart describes the event of Jesus' third resurrection appearance in John 21. There the disciples were in the same place they have first met Jesus. There on the Sea of Galilee where they had first heard Jesus say come follow me, they found themselves out at night fishing again. Who knows how close they were to the actual place where they use to fish before pulling up their boats and leaving it all behind to follow Jesus. What we can say is that they were back to the place it had all started but things were not the same. They may have been in the same spot, but because of their experience with Jesus they were not the same. Their life now was not the life they had before they met Jesus. It was the same spot, but it was a lifetime apart.

Think of what they had witnessed. They had seen Jesus touch the blind, so they could see. They had watched the lame pick up their mats and walk away. They had seen thousands fed with nothing, but the lunch of a small boy. They had witnessed Jesus confront those in authority and heard him say things that they were still trying to understand. They had watched Lazarus come out of the tomb. They had only a few days earlier been shocked as Jesus was arrested and crucified. Yet, that had not been the end of the story. They had been in the upper room in Jerusalem and Jesus had appeared to them. Jesus, the one who was crucified and died, had risen. They had experienced it and although they returned to Galilee and to fishing that night they could not erase all that had experienced. They may have been in the same place, but they were not the same men as they were when they last fished in that place.

It is there in that same place that Jesus came and met them again. As we discussed last week, Jesus came as a stranger on the shore and met them again calling them to fellowship and service. Today we look at the rest of the story. Jesus comes to Peter to remind him that his life has purpose. Jesus had come that day to the Sea of Galilee to remind his disciples that their life had purpose. The cross and resurrection had not ended their purpose, just the opposite. The cross and resurrection had created their ultimate pur-

pose. Jesus comes to remind them that once you experience the resurrected Jesus, your life has a whole new purpose.

In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren begins by stating that we will never understand this life, until we realize the purpose of this life is to be lived in a relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Once we have come to faith in Jesus, our lives take on their true purpose. Peter had seen the risen Lord and yet was still struggling with the purpose of his life. I think that is why Jesus had this conversation with Peter, to remind him of his true purpose. Let's look at the three areas of Peter's life that Jesus addresses to return his life to purpose.

Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Much has been written about that word these. Some believe it is a referral to the other disciples. Others believe that it is a question about fishing and his former life. How did Jesus motion when He asks this question? Did He point to boats, the nets, the fish and the sea? Did He point to the other disciples? Both possibilities reveal the same depth of inquiry. Let's look at this question from two perspectives. First, do you love me more than your previous life?

If this is the case, then Jesus is telling us that our past can deter us from our true purpose which is to follow him. Peter could not return to his old way of life and neither can we. As we said last week, Jesus had come to remind them that their past failure had not been fatal. Our past is not the last word for us when we follow Jesus.

Peter would discover that you cannot go back to life the way it used to be, once you have experienced the resurrection. Jesus finds Peter where he is. If Peter is in the Upper Room then Jesus came to the Upper Room. Now the disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus shows up there. Once you know Jesus, Jesus is not going to just let you go. We cannot just go away and hide, or act like nothing has happened to us. No, when we have met the resurrected Jesus, our lives cannot simply go back to where they were before we met Jesus. No matter how we might try, we have been changed and Jesus will come calling us no matter where we might go.

That is the love of God. God will not ignore God's children. God will not simply let us go away. God will pursue us. God will call to us. God will work in our lives to bring us back into fellowship with him.

One of the great temptations in Christianity is to resort back to life the way we were, before we accepted Christ or to a way of life that we have left to mature in our faith. That is why Paul writes "only

live up to what you have already attained." Paul understood the temptation to fall away in faith, or to resort back to familiar sin. Do you wonder if Jesus said to Peter "what are you doing back where you started?"

Have you ever felt like God is asking you why are you back where you started? How did you get back to this place in your life? Have you forgotten all that I have brought you through? Have you forgotten all the times I provided for you? Have you forgotten the feeling of knowing that you are forgiven? Have you forgotten the joy that came through spending time with me? Have you forgotten the peace that comes through serving me?

One of the ways that we are deterred from our purpose of following Jesus is to be shackled by our past. You just can't go forward always living in the past. Sometimes it feels as though life has not changed, but when we have come to Jesus our lives are changed. We are not the same person we use to be. Now sometimes we might feel the same. Sometimes we might deal with the same old habitual sin. Sometimes we might be filled with the same doubts and struggles of faith. But spiritually speaking, biblically speaking, once we come to Christ we are new creations. The old person is crucified with Christ and we are new people. Peter was on this side of resurrection and although the sea was familiar, the shoreline was familiar, the faces of those in the village would have been familiar and everyone might have thought there is the same old Peter, the same old Peter did not exist. Not any more. He had been with Jesus and he had seen the risen Lord. Once that truly happens in your life there is no going back. You just can't do it and be satisfied with life.

Don't let your past deter you from your purpose in following Christ today.

Let's look at this question from a different perspective. If Jesus motioned to the other disciples when he asked his question do you love me more than these, then Jesus was addressing Peter's guilt.

After breakfast on the shore Jesus comes personally to Peter. Remember Peter had promised that he would never forsake Jesus. He would never deny Jesus. In fact Peter said he would follow Jesus even to death. Jesus' question reminds Peter of his brash statement and his denial. Peter's denial happened all too easily. He was not threatened by Roman Guards or armed men. Peter's denial had come really without any threats. According to John 18:16, the first denial was to a servant girl who asked "you are not one of his disciples are you?" The brash Peter's first denial is to a servant girl. The second denial happens when a stranger who is warming himself by a fire outside the High Priest's home asks if Peter is

not one of the disciples. The final denial occurs after the inquiry of another servant to the High Priest, a relative to the one whom Peter had cut off his ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. Now we don't know how much power any of these people really had, but their description is not people of power. The brash Peter who said I will die with you and who had pulled a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane is now denying Jesus after being accused by a servant girl, a stranger and another servant.

No wonder Peter felt so guilty. No wonder that even after he had seen Jesus alive he chose to go back fishing. I think Peter really doubted that he could be used by God. I think Peter really doubted that his denial could be forgiven. I think that Peter may have been drowning in his guilt and regret, so he did what was natural, he went home and went fishing.

It is one thing to not return to an old way of life, but it is another to be able to overcome the guilt of our past. Yet, living with guilt can deter us from following Jesus as we should. Sometimes our guilt is the result of others not letting us forget. It is as one person said that it is hard to bury your past when everyone has a shovel. It is true that there are moments when you think that the guilt of your past is finally behind you, only to meet someone from your past that is the constant reminder of your failure and mistakes. I think Jesus' question may have been the moment that Peter again had to come to grips with his guilt.

I think it is interesting how Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. There are many suggestions to why Jesus asks Peter three times. Remember that Peter had denied Jesus three times. I wonder if there are three questions to give Peter the opportunity to deal with each and everyone of those moments and receive forgiveness. There is something important about dealing with our sins one by one, instead of just our sin. Naming our failure, naming our sins, naming to God our moments of forgiveness helps us receive forgiveness and release our guilt.

I was speaking with someone who is not a member this week who asked this question. They said "I have been reading the Bible a lot this past year and I know that the Bible says that God forgives us and forgets our sin, but I am having a hard time with that. In fact when I lay down at night what fills my mind is all the ways that I have failed God, my family, my friends and others. I am reminded every night of all that I have done. I do believe that God has forgiven me, but I cannot forget. How can I forget?"

A pastor friend shared with me recently his thoughts about forgive and forget. He commented that forgiveness was not about truly forgetting in the sense

that we don't remember, or that we live in denial of the past. Instead, he suggests that forgiveness is to face our past with our eyes wide open, fully aware of the pain we have caused and the sin we have committed, and yet choose to make decisions about the future as though our past does not define us.

When God says he forgives and forgets, do we really believe that God who knows all things does not know what we have done? Instead, the word says that God remembers our sins no more. The phrase is an intentional phrase. God knows our past, it is not that he cannot recall it, but instead it is that he chooses not to recall it. God chooses not to hold our sins against us. God chooses to treat us as though our sins did not occur. Both forgiveness and forgetfulness is a choice.

In the same way we must choose to receive God's forgiveness and we must choose to receive God's forgetfulness. We must make the choice today that I am not going live today in the shadow of yesterday. I am not going to live with guilt, but I am going to live as though I am forgiven, which I am.

There is one other issue for Peter discovering his purpose in the resurrection. That issue is revealed in Peter's question to Jesus. Jesus' question helps Peter deal with his past and guilt, but it is Peter's question and Jesus' answer that helps Peter deal with his comparison others. Peter asks Jesus what Jesus has planned for John. Jesus' answer is essentially what is that to you? I will deal with John in the way I choose, but you follow me. It seems to me, the other issue that we have in finding our purpose in following Christ is that we spend too much time worrying about another's obedience.

This concern manifests itself in three ways. First in regards to our sin, it is much easier to spend time pointing out another's sin than to deal with our own. This is why Jesus warned us about pointing out the speck dust in someone else's eye while we have a plank in our own. To discover our purpose in Christ we must spend time dealing with our own failures, shortcomings and sin. The Psalmist would pray search my heart and know me O Lord, Test my anxious thoughts, see if there is any offensive ways in me and lead me to the way of everlasting. The Psalmist knew the importance of focusing on one's own sin. He cries for God to reveal his sinful desires, search my heart. He asks God to reveal his sinful thoughts, so his mind might be pure. He asks for God to show him his sinful actions, so he might be righteous. Let us not be deterred by another's sin, but let us seek to know and confess our own.

Secondly, this mistake manifest itself in regards to our talents and gifts. We spend our time looking at the gifts and talents of others and wishing we had