

Message #66

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John

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MOTIVATION IN CHRISTIAN SERVICE

JOHN 21:15-25

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Vacation Bible School was a major effort for us this week. A high percentage of our congregation was involved in this outreach. In addition to those who were physically present for the six nights of this outreach, there were others who helped out in various ways. Some donated money. Others brought food and various objects. Don was preparing the video presentations. There were helpers for setup and cleanup. Hopefully most of you prayed for it.

So why do we as individuals help out with Vacation Bible School? Why do we participate in other acts of Christian service, whether they be at home, at church, or in the community? The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote in one of his books (*The Idiot*) (PROJECTOR ON--- DOSTOEVSKY QUOTE), **“The causes of human actions are usually immeasurably more complex than are our subsequent explanations of them, and can rarely be distinctly discerned.”**

I suspect that his analysis is true. Human motivations are complex and overlapping. I thought that we might have a little audience participation. What are some of the inner forces that motivate us to do what we do, whether for good or bad? What are the motives, conscious or unconscious, that prompt us to do what we do?

1. Love for God
2. Love for family
3. Love for self--- self-glorification
4. Guilt
5. Habit

6. Desire to please another person
7. Desire to hurt an enemy
8. Pleasure
9. Lust
10. Addiction
11. Direction from one in authority
12. Self-preservation
13. Avoidance of pain
14. Desire for security
15. Desire for fame
16. Desire for power
17. Desire for status
18. Anger
19. Fatigue, envy
20. Jealousy
21. To make a living, get money
22. Love for country
23. Seeking justice
24. Seeking revenge

The case can be made that for Christians, doing the right thing is more important than the motive behind those right things, The Apostle Paul addresses this issue in Philippians #1. (PHILIPPIANS 1:15) In v. 15 he writes, **“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.”** Here are negative motives--- envy and rivalry. (PHILIPPIANS 1:18) In v. 18 Paul adds, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”**

It would appear that right deeds are generally more important than the motives behind them. But that is not to say that our motivations are unimportant. Right motivations are more likely to sustain right deeds. Such is the lesson of our passage this morning. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our study of #20 of John's Gospel we learned about the resurrection of Jesus. We saw that Thomas was not part of the group of disciples to which Jesus first appeared after His resurrection. He was a skeptic who demanded that He see and feel Jesus and His wounds before he would believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. When Jesus did appear to Thomas, he declared that Jesus was Lord and God. This led to John's statement of purpose at the end of #20: **"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."**

Chapter 21 is an epilogue. John focuses on the situation of Peter. We saw in this Gospel that Peter denied that he knew Jesus to a servant girl and other servants despite his earlier vows to die with Jesus. John mentions that Jesus appeared to the disciples, which included Peter. But what is his status going forward? At the beginning of this chapter Peter and the other disciples seem aimless. Now Jesus sets Peter on the right track. In the process he provides us with wise words about the proper motivation in Christian service.

I.

In vv. 15-17 of #21, which is found on p. 907 in the black Bibles, we learn about THE MOTIVATION OF LOVE FOR JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE MOTIVATION OF LOVE...) At the beginning of this chapter, six disciples of Jesus follow the lead of Peter in deciding to go fishing. They fish all night and catch nothing. Jesus appears on the shore. He tells them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. They do that and end up with a large catch of fish. They realize that it is Jesus on the beach. They come in to shore, and Jesus serves them breakfast. The primary lesson that Jesus wants them to learn is that they must depend upon Him, even when He is gone. Their mission is to catch men.

In vv. 15-17 Jesus deals with Peter: **"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"**

Peter had to be dealing with guilt and shame in regard to his inaction at the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. He had promised his unwavering commitment to Jesus. Then at the religious trial of Jesus he denied to several servants of the priestly family that he even knew Jesus. It would appear that a one-to-one talk with Jesus was needed at some point after the resurrection.

On the evening of that first Easter the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem. They had received reports of Jesus sightings. Before Jesus showed up to the whole group, there is this brief reference in the Gospel of Luke. (LUKE 24:34) Somebody in the group tells the two disciples who have arrived from their trip to Emmaus, **“The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”** We don’t know anything else about this private meeting. I suspect that there was some kind of reconciliation. Now we have a more public restoration. At least John, and perhaps other disciples, witness this interaction between Jesus and Peter. If Peter is going to continue to function as a leader among the disciples, it is good that other disciples witness this interaction.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus starts off his conversation with Peter by using his full name. This suggests that He is making a formal, important statement. Many of us as kids have had the experience of one of our parents addressing us with first and middle name. We usually recognize that we are in trouble, or at least that we have to pay attention to what they are about to say.

Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him “more than these.” It is not immediately obvious what, or who, the “these” are. Jesus could be asking Peter if he loves Him more than he loves these other disciples. Among these disciples on this beach is his own brother Andrew along with five other disciples. Jesus could be challenging Peter to love Him more than he loves other people, even members of his own family. Certainly Jesus made other statements recorded in the Gospels where He did indeed say that those who love earthly family more than Jesus are not worthy of Him. (cf. Matthew 10:37)

Jesus could also be asking Peter if he loves Him more than these fishing things. Peter and his crew have just returned from a fishing expedition. They have fish and nets and boats by them on the beach. This is the work that these guys have known. There is always a danger that our work and career can take a higher place in our hierarchy of values than our relationship with Jesus.

Given Peter’s recent threefold denial of Jesus, and his claim that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples, it is most likely that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than these other disciples love

Jesus. Just before His arrest, Jesus warned the disciples that they would all fall away. Matthew (MATTHEW 26:33) records this brief scenario: **“Peter answered him [Jesus], ‘Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.’”** “You can’t trust these other guys, but I will never let you down.” Pride and self-confidence are dangerous things.

Notice how Peter answers the question in our passage. (PROJECTOR OFF) He asserts that he loves Jesus, but he does not make any comparison with anyone else. Jesus asks the question two more times. It is obvious that Peter’s three-fold denial forms that backdrop for this questioning. The third time that Jesus asks the question John notes that Peter was grieved. He is certainly thinking about his three-fold denial of Jesus. His regret is evident. Yet Jesus does not request any penance, no determination to do better. He simply wants Peter’s love.

Many of you who have been in Bible studies and have listened to sermons for many years have been made aware of the fact that Jesus and Peter use different words for love in these three verses. The Greek verb *agapao* is often associated with God’s sacrificial love. The Greek verb *phileo* is often associated with brotherly love, as in the name of Philadelphia. That distinction is probably overstated, especially in the use of these words by John.

For example, in John 3:35 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 3:35) the author writes, **“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”** The verb is a form of *agapao*. In John #5 v. 20 (JOHN 5:20) the same author says, **“For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. ...”** This time John uses a form of the verb *phileo*. It seems like John is using the verbs interchangeably. For the context of both verses has to do with the love of the Father for the Son.

The scholars point out that John seems to use other verbs in this way. They suggest that John does this just for stylistic variation. (PROJECTOR OFF) The other important thing that we need to take into account is that the first language of these people was Aramaic, not Greek. Probably they were speaking in Aramaic. So this means that the author John was putting this conversation into the language of the Greeks. These aren’t the actual words that Peter and Jesus used. John is translating their words into Greek. We don’t know if there was any distinction in the verbs that Peter and Jesus originally used. In fact, the Aramaic translation of the New Testament uses just one verb for love in these verses.

Although Peter is grieved by the third posing of the question by Jesus, Jesus makes no direct criticism. He expresses no anger or reproof. Instead, each time Jesus gives a charge to Peter. “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Jesus is saying the same basic thing in each charge. John may again be

using pairs of synonyms in the Greek. He speaks of sheep and lambs. He uses the verbs “feed” and “tend.” Literally the second verb is shepherd. The meaning of “feeding” is obvious. “Shepherding” includes feeding and all of the other tasks that are involved in being a shepherd.

Peter the fisherman was previously told by Jesus to become a fisher of men. Now he is told to become a shepherd of sheep. The Great Commission is generally a call to the apostles, and to us Christians, to be involved in evangelism. The specific direction by Jesus to Peter is to be a shepherd of the sheep. There is perhaps an indication here that Peter will be more involved in pastoring Christians than evangelizing the lost. All of the apostles are to be witnesses for Jesus. But Peter may have a specific responsibility here from Jesus to build up the flock. Paul had a different charge from Jesus. He was told to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He was to be an evangelist, although pastoring would be a responsibility that would come along with this.

Our Catholic friends claim that Peter was appointed to be the first pope. There is no mention here of an office. There is no indication here that Peter is given authority over the other apostles. By the time of this writing Peter has been dead for 25 or 30 years. There is no indication that there is an appointed successor for Peter to his position. This seems to be a reinstatement by Jesus for Peter to a position of service, not an elevation to primacy over other Christians.

Peter appears to have learned his lesson. He makes no claim to have a greater love for Jesus than anyone else. He makes no claim to have better behavior now. In v. 17 he simply appeals to the omniscience of Jesus. Peter recognizes that Jesus is God, and His “all-knowingness” should show to Jesus that he really does love Him.

It is this love for Jesus which should be a central motivation for Christian service. Love is a powerful force. It is love that motivates many people to serve their countries in the military, sometimes to even die for their countries. It is love that will motivate people to give up much for the sake of their family. It is love for wrong things that will break up families, that will result in addictive behaviors, that will lead to destruction of self. The object of one’s love is crucial. What we love is demonstrated by what, or whom, we serve.

The power of this love for Jesus as a motivation for Christian service is demonstrated in the life of Jerry Wood. If he was still present with us today, he probably wouldn’t be too happy about me talking about him like this. But it takes a powerful force to motivate someone born in this country to give up forty years of one’s life to move to Brazil and learn a new language. It is love for Jesus that motivated he and

Lois to live in primitive conditions in the upper Amazon jungle. It was love for Jesus that motivated them to plant churches and later to teach Christians in a Brazilian seminary. In more recent years it was love for Jesus that motivated Jerry and Lois to be involved in prison ministry here in the States. It was love for Jesus that motivated them to be regular participants in our weekly prayer ministry.

Each of us as Christians has individual directions and callings from Jesus. But we are all to be involved in serving Him in some capacity, and it is love for Jesus that will sustain us in the long term in worthwhile service for Him. Do you love Him?

II.

In v. 18 and the first part of v. 19 we encounter THE MOTIVATION OF SACRIFICE FOR JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE MOTIVATION OF SACRIFICE...) Jesus says, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)”** When Jesus uses the words “truly, truly” in this Gospel, it means that He is about to say something of extra importance.

It is true for most of us in our younger years that we have a certain freedom. As the years go by, we tend to acquire more responsibilities. We get jobs and families and service responsibilities. Eventually age and health limit some of our freedoms. Eventually we often need extra care.

For Peter, the limitation would involve the manner of his death. He would stretch out his hands. This was an expression that was commonly used in regard to crucifixion, which was imposed throughout the Roman Empire on those who rebelled against the national government. A condemned criminal had his arms tied to the crosspiece and was forced to carry it to the place of execution.

Why would Jesus tell Peter that this was his destiny? This would be a dark thing that we might think would weigh upon any person’s mind. I suspect, however, that it might have had a positive effect on Peter. He had once vowed that he would die with Jesus, that he had a greater commitment to Jesus than any of the other disciples. He had failed miserably. He had denied to a little servant girl that he even knew Jesus. That failure had a potential to haunt Peter for the rest of his life. It had the potential to plague him with self-doubt and uncertainty. But now Jesus gave him an assurance that he would eventually die for Jesus. In the end he would be crucified for Jesus. Peter has an assurance from Jesus that he would not fail in his commitment to Him.

What do we know from history about the circumstances of Peter's death? Clement was an early church leader who wrote a letter to Christians at Corinth around 96 AD. (CLEMENT QUOTATION) He says, **"Peter, through unjust envy, endured not one or two but many labours, and at last, having delivered his testimony, departed unto the place of glory due to him."** (1 Clement 5.4) That is a bit vague and unspecific.

Eusebius was an early church leader who became the bishop of Caesarea, the former capital of the province of Judea in the first century. He wrote a history of the church in the early 300s AD. (EUSEBIUS QUOTATION) He says, **"Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way."** (*Church History*, 3.1) Other early traditions say that this happened in the reign of Emperor Nero in the 60s AD. The Apostle John wrote some thirty years later. He would have known of the story of his death more directly. He does not record the details here. Many in John's audience would have known something about Peter's death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We humans were made to serve a cause beyond ourselves. We recognize the honor and glory that is involved in the willingness to sacrifice for family or country or some other cause. The motivation that will produce eternal results in Christian service is sacrifice for Jesus. Behind such a sacrificial attitude is a realization of what Jesus has done for us. He has died for us so that by faith in Him we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life and a glorious future in heaven.

Such was the sacrificial attitude that Jerry and family had in living in the upper Amazon basin. Such is the sacrificial attitude that some of us have taken in choosing lower paying careers in order to serve people. Such is the sacrifice that some of us may have taken in not reaching the upper reaches of corporations because we are unwilling to violate Christian principles. Such is the sacrificial attitude that we may have in caring for family members or aging parents. There is not a lot of glory in that, but when done for Jesus, it wins His approval. Generosity with our financial resources and service in the community and work in the church also may reflect a motivation of sacrifice for Jesus.

III.

In vv. 19-25 we encounter THE MOTIVATION OF CONTENTMENT WITH JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MOTIVATION OF CONTENTMENT...) In the second part of v. 19 we read, **"And after saying this he said**

to him [Peter], **'Follow me.'**" "Follow me" is a present tense verb. It could be translated "Keep on following me." This is the challenge to all of John's readers. Keep following Jesus.

Verses 20 & 21, **"Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?'"**

Peter is speaking of John. Apparently they are walking along the beach. After Jesus tells Peter about his future destiny, Peter turns around and asks about John. The author John makes reference to what happened in the Upper Room a couple of weeks ago. At the beginning of the Last Supper Jesus predicted that one of the disciples would betray him. John was seated next to Jesus. Peter seems to have been across the table. Peter motioned to John to find out from Jesus who it was who would betray Him. This reference reminds the reader of John's closeness both to Jesus and to Peter.

Jesus has just told Peter that the cost of discipleship for Peter will indeed be very high. In the end he will be crucified like Jesus was. So Peter asks Jesus about John's destiny.

The answer is given in v. 22: **"Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!'"** Basically Jesus says, "That is none of your business." "If I return at the rapture and John never experiences physical death, that should not matter to you. Each Christian has his or her own assignment.

It is part of human nature to compare our situation in life with that of others. Often this leads to competition and jealousy. Jesus is trying to squash that. This should not be the case among Christians. The lesson is that each follower of Jesus should be content with his or her own assignment. Most importantly, we should be content with Jesus. We should be satisfied with our relationship with Him and the assignment that He has for us in life. Everyone has challenges. Each of us has a unique training program and a unique set of opportunities. We should focus on accomplishing what Jesus has laid out for us. Along the way, we encourage and help each other.

John was to experience a considerably longer physical life than Peter. Martyrdom was not part of his package. But both of them ultimately found their contentment in Jesus.

According to v. 23, **“So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’”** The saying of v. 22 was apparently circulated widely in the early church. John is addressing the misperception that this meant that Jesus would return before John died. Thus we have the first example of mistaken date setting in regard to the return of Jesus.

Verse 24: **“This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”** John is signing off on this letter. He is claiming that his testimony is true.

There is a technical question here about the reference to “we.” Is John referring to fellow leaders of the entire church? Is he talking about fellow elders in his home church of Ephesus where he is reputed to have ended his life? It is possible that he is using a narrative “we.” Sometimes I use this in my own preaching. I might say that last week we talked about Chapter 20 in John’s Gospel. I am meaning that actually I talked about it. So the exact meaning here is not clear. His basic point is that what he has said in this book is true. Truth is foundational to the whole Christian story.

In v. 25 he continues, **“Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”** John claims to have told only part of the story of Jesus. There were other amazing things that Jesus did in the course of His life that we are not told about. But John has told us what is necessary for us to know.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

According to vv. 30 & 31 of the previous chapter, **“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** I hope that all of you have been convinced that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament and that He was God who became man and that by dying on the cross, He paid the penalty for the sins of the world. His resurrection gave proof to His claims. If we will trust in this Jesus, we will receive the gift of eternal life.