

The Lord's Interview with Your Soul
John 21:15-19

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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." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jn. 21:15

There was once a preacher – Charles Kingsley was his name – who, it is said, began his sermons by leaning across the pulpit and somberly saying to his people, "Here we are again to talk about what is really going on in your soul and mine."¹

That is just exactly what Jesus does. Jesus comes up to you and with the utmost seriousness says, "I want to have a talk with you about something important."

The interview Jesus wants to have with your soul is quite like the interview he had with Peter in John 21. If you listen to that conversation you can better imagine the conversation Christ wants to have with you.

The interview Jesus wants to have with you is a purposeful interview.

Jesus had an agenda for his conversation with Peter. People who know how to get things done understand more is accomplished when meetings have an agenda to guide them and when phone calls or office visits have a definite purpose. Jesus had something he wanted to accomplish with Peter and he got straight to it.

Jesus wanted to rehabilitate Peter. Peter had started to recover, but he was still in pieces. He had denied Jesus. He was shocked at his denial. And he was shocked that his denial of Jesus came forth so easily. He had boasted of his loyalty and devotion. He had boasted of the strength of his faith and of his constancy. Jesus had said at table that Thursday that one of the disciples was going to betray him and that all would forsake him. Peter said that would never be. Peter said he'd never deny Jesus. Peter said the others might, but he never would (Mt. 26:20-35). Still he did and that rooster crowed the fact of it unforgettably into his ears. Peter ran away a broken man that night, and he wept bitterly (Mt. 26:69-75). Jesus wanted him to know now that all that was in the past. He wanted him to know he was forgiven. He wanted to begin to rebuild Peter's confidence and self-esteem as a disciple.

Well, I don't know what particular purpose Jesus has with you these days, but you can be assured there is something Jesus wants to accomplish in you, for you, or through you. He wants to build you into the kind of person he wants you to be. Maybe it's to lift you out of a sadness. Maybe it's to send you into a service. Maybe it's to bring you to a realization. I don't know. Maybe you don't know. Maybe you do. This much I'm sure is clear: Jesus summons you to an interview and he has a purpose he wants to accomplish.

¹ Paul Scherer, *For We Have This Treasure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), p. 157.

The interview Jesus wants to have with you is a serious interview.

Peter knew that Jesus was a funny man. He had heard the story about the guy with a log in his eye who went around telling people they had specks in theirs (Mt. 7:3). He had heard him tease about some of the Pharisees and others who were nothing but pompous windbags who had more words than thoughts (Mt. 6:5). He had even heard Jesus give him his nickname. “Peter,” you may remember, is the equivalent of “Rocky.” Jesus had a penchant for giving out comical nicknames. He called James and John “sons of thunder.” He called Simon “Peter” – “Rocky.” My theory is it all started that day out on the Sea of Galilee when Peter asked if he could come out and walk on the water like Jesus (Mt. 14:22-33). He did, but soon started sinking. Jesus pulled him back into the boat and I think they all had a good laugh about how Simon was sinking like a rock. I think they started calling him “Rocky” after that.

Jesus doesn’t call him “Rocky” in this interview. This interview is too serious for that. Jesus, like a parent who means business, uses Peter’s real name and his full name at that. I can still hear my mother calling from another room in our house, “Mark Edward! When I call you I want you to come!” You may have a memory like that. Full names get used when something important is about to be said. And so Jesus did not call Peter “Rocky” in this interview. He called him by his full name: “Simon son of John.”

It’s serious, this thing Jesus wants to say to you. You can feel it in some of the liturgies of the church. Full names are used at Baptism. Full names are used at Confirmation. Full names are used at least at the start of weddings. Full names are used at funerals. We hear them then, but they are spoken at other times throughout life as well. You might be especially sensitive to it now in these pandemic days when everything is so different and strange and unsettled. The Lord has something important to say to you and it is serious enough he uses your full name.

The interview Jesus wants to have with you is a personal interview.

I went to the eye doctor the other day. I hate going to the eye doctor. It’s too much pressure. It makes me nervous. At the dentist’s office I can just lay back, open my mouth, and they do what needs to be done. I don’t have to participate. At the eye doctor’s I have to answer questions. Which is better, *a* or *b*? Which is clearer, *1* or *2*? If I get it wrong the prescription is going to be wrong and my glasses won’t be right and my vision will be skewed. But “it’s-a me, it’s-a me, it’s-a me, O Lord, sitting in the eye doctor’s chair.” No one can sit there and answer for me.

Jesus had something important to talk over with Peter, and no one could answer for him. He had to do his own speaking. There was an earlier day when Jesus asked the disciples what others were saying about him, and then he asked the disciples what they thought about him. But the context of the question that day was a collective. When Jesus said, “What about you, who do you say that I am?” the version of *you* that he used was plural. He asked all the disciples (Mt. 16:13-15). The question Jesus asked Peter in this interview was one he asked Peter all by himself. None of the other disciples were around. Peter had to answer for himself. There could be no proxy.

And this same Jesus expects you to answer for yourself. No one can go to the eye appointment for you. No one can walk through the metal detector on your behalf. When Jesus

calls you, he wants you to come. You can't send a proxy. Jesus has something important and serious to talk over with you, and it is personal.

The interview Jesus wants to have with you is an emotional interview.

Here we begin to get right at the heart of the matter. "Simon son of John, do you love me?" The Latin version of our text uses for *love* a word that means *to choose*. It's rather like the line from the old wedding ceremony that asked each member of the couple "do you forsake all others, keeping this one to yourself?"

Well now, that's quite a different matter than "Do you believe in me?" The question of belief is rather an intellectual one. It is a matter of study. It is a matter of weighing the evidence. It is a matter of thinking things through and coming to a decision. The question of belief is chiefly a matter of the head. The question of love is a matter of the heart.

We can see the vast difference between believing in Jesus and loving Jesus when we look at the demons in the New Testament. I do not want to move too far into a demonology this morning; let's just think of the demons now as New Testament characters antithetical to Christ. They know Jesus. They understand Jesus. They consent to the power of Jesus. They believe in Jesus. But they do not love Jesus. They never choose him.

Do you? That's the question of this purposeful, serious, and personal interview Christ wants to have with your soul. Do you love Jesus? Do you choose him? Do you forsake all others?

I don't know the particular work Jesus wants to work in you. How far down in the dumps you are. How confused you are. How weary you are. How fallen apart you are. How many pieces you are in. I don't know the particular thing he wants to say to you. But it begins with this. Do you love Jesus? That is the starting point. That is the building block. That is the first step. Do you love Jesus? Do you choose him?

Someone once said, "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."² That's a pretty good philosophy.

The interview Jesus wants to have with you is a missional interview.

Every conversation with Jesus includes a call to action. John 21 starts out with Peter saying "I am going fishing." (Jn. 21:3) Jesus uses this interview to tell him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. Jesus calls the fisherman to be a shepherd.

The metaphor I want to draw out here does not work perfectly. I know that. But I ask you to focus on where it does work rather than where it doesn't. The metaphor is this: a fisherman takes but a shepherd gives. Now I know that does not work perfectly when pressed. Fisherman do not simply take lives from rivers and lakes, streams and seas; they don't fish merely for the sport of it; they eat and supply food that sustains. And shepherds do not simply give; they know

² Herbert Butterfield in Elton Trueblood, *A Place to Stand* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 40. Trueblood's reference is to Butterfield's *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 146.

the taste of mutton; they know the flavor of lamb. It's not a perfect metaphor, but work with me. There is yet this analogy: to fish is to take life, to shepherd is to sustain life.

Jesus calls the fisherman to be a shepherd. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed the flock. The task is one of somehow seeing to the lives of others that they be nourished, safe, and secure. It's a call not to selfish enjoyment – a peaceful day out on the lake with a pole – though there is nothing wrong with rest and recreation. The fundamental call is not to self-care but to other-care. The fundamental call is to mission, to care for your neighbor, to care for the other, to help sustain those who are in need.

The interview Jesus has with your soul issues in a call to mission. Love him so passionately that his concern becomes your concern. Don't live for yourself. Live for Christ and for others. There is life for yourself in that, and plenty of it.