

## **Gone Fishing** - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **John 21:1-25** (#508)

**Introduction:** The Gospel of John has been a real challenge to me. One of my goals when I decided to preach through this book was to explore John's recounting of Christ in a deeper manner than I ever had before – and let me tell you, I got even more than I bargained for! Isn't that one of the blessings of the Scriptures: there is always more here than we might think?

On that note, I struggled with which way to take this final chapter. So much of it is about the disciples as a group, and how Jesus reassures and encourages them before the great mission that they undertake in Acts, that I wanted to focus on them overall. On the other hand, Peter himself is a major focus of this chapter as well – particularly his restoration. So what are we to do? In my case, I am choosing to see – and talk about – both emphases. Thus the title, “Gone Fishing,” which describes the entire setting of the chapter. And second, my introduction, which will set us up to see what will happen with Peter...

Do you ever wish that you could have a “do over”? A chance to swing at the ball of life again? A “mulligan” as the golfers call it? I can't be the only one, can I? I've thought this at times with things that are fairly minor – phone conversations that didn't go as planned, emails that were misinterpreted from one poorly chosen word. I've also thought this about major turning points in life: what if I had studied abroad during college? What if I had been even more focused in seminary? I suspect that you can fill in your own blanks with questions like these as well. On the one hand, it isn't very helpful to speculate like this. The Lord has given us only one life to live this side of heaven, so there's no sense in constantly fretting about “what could have been.” On the other hand, by God's grace, sometimes we do get the opportunity to try again at something – even something important – and we'll see Peter's own shot at it again in these verses. Join me in **John 21**, and let's see how the Lord restores Peter and blesses His disciples...

**21:1-3** Our final chapter of this gospel breaks down into two main stories. The first, which we are beginning here, concerns the disciples and how they are living and acting after Christ's resurrection. These initial verses set the scene...

By this point, Christ has already revealed Himself in His resurrection glory to the disciples, yet notice that – at least for these seven – they aren't much changed. Perhaps they are confused. Perhaps they are waiting for some sort of signal, or some sort of prompting of the Holy Spirit's arrival. Maybe they are simply waiting for Jesus (**Mark 14:28, 16:7**) to direct them to what's next. Whichever the case, I want you to notice how they revert back to what they know best: fishing. It is Peter who brings up the idea – it's what he knows best: he was a fisherman before he started following Jesus around, after all.

In a scene reminiscent of **Luke 5**, we find the disciples out fishing late into the evening. But in spite of their best efforts, they don't catch a thing.

Friends, isn't that how life can be? You try your hardest to set a new plan for getting into God's Word, and yet it seems that no matter how good your intentions, it's always a struggle. Or perhaps you look for opportunities to speak to that family member about Jesus – but when the moment seems to arrive, the words just won't come. Maybe – like Peter and these disciples – even very simple things – your work or your hobbies – just don't come together, they don't satisfy like they used to. So often, our solution is to try harder. To go through the motions. To assume that what's needed is more effort, more time, more money, more training. On some occasions, perhaps that is the case. Then again, if what is missing is the power that Christ-alone can give, no amount of time or money or effort will bring about success.

The disciples are waiting. What's next? Let's keep reading...

**21:4-14** What's next is something of a replay. Just as the fishing was bad back during the night of **Luke 5**, so it is here. And just as Jesus changed everything in **Luke 5**, so it will be again here. There, Jesus told them to put out again and let

down their nets. The result was a miraculous catch, which led to those first disciples following Jesus. Here, the result will be no different.

Jesus is standing on the shore, yet He remains unrecognized by the disciples. John tells us that the boat is about 100 yards offshore – perhaps it was simply hard to see Jesus. Or maybe there is meant to be something spiritual here: maybe the disciples don't see because they still don't fully trust Christ's words about seeing Him in Galilee. Not that they've denied the faith, but instead perhaps they've taken on a passive "let go and let God" approach. They'll do life on their terms until God intervenes in some way. Whatever the case, intervene He will!

Jesus calls out to them – using the language of a fatherly teacher – and asks about the fishing. When they reply that "no," they haven't caught anything, Jesus responds by telling them to put the nets in on the other side of the boat. From a humanistic standpoint, that wouldn't seem to make any difference – it would only be a few feet from one side of the boat to the other. Yet, just as before, so it is now: they cast the nets and the miraculous haul is so much that the catch can't be pulled into the boat. At this, Peter recognizes that only Jesus could do such a thing. So – reminiscent of **Matthew 14** – Peter jumps overboard. He can't get to Jesus fast enough!

Once Peter gets to land – and the rest of the disciples catch up – they find that Jesus has made breakfast that morning. Don't miss the imagery here, because it will set the tone for what follows. First, the charcoal fire of **verse 9** is notable. The only other place that the word is used in the New Testament is in **John 18**, when Peter took warmth around the same fire that Christ's enemies did. That parallel is important to see with what will happen to Peter next. Second, look at what Jesus has for the meal. On the one hand, fish and bread wouldn't be too out of place back then. But one of the other times we've seen Jesus handling fish and bread with other people was at the Feeding of the 5,000 (**Matthew 14**) and the Feeding of the 4,000 (**Mark 8**). In both cases, Jesus distributes bread and fish to everyone present, showing how the Messiah provides for His people.

Here, interestingly, the bread and fish won't be multiplied in the same way, though the miracle is no less, since Christ provided the fish in the first place.

Let me highlight two more images, and then we'll draw some conclusions about these verses. In **Luke**, Jesus is often noted for the meals that He has with people – usually with those whom society would label “unclean” or “sinners.” Yet Christ is not embarrassed to have a meal with them. Amazing, isn't it, that Jesus is not ashamed to share a meal with His disciples – these very ones that fled from Him? And with Peter specifically, who denied Him?

Second, in **Luke 24**, on the road to Emmaus, the travelers only finally recognize Jesus when He sits down at a meal, takes bread, and gives it to those He is with. We'll save a longer study on the significance of Jesus' meals for another time, but notice the connection here: it is only at breakfast, sharing this meal together, when the rest of the disciples are sure that the Lord is there in front of them.

Church: we've made the point repeatedly in John that Christ provides exactly what His followers need, and He does so exactly when they need it. Perhaps not when they want it or in the way they desire it, but Jesus knows the perfect timing for all things. Isn't that what we see here? Wouldn't it have been natural for the disciples to act sheepish, embarrassed? Perhaps even to shy away from Jesus, thinking that He'd want nothing to do with them anymore? Yet Christ expresses His grace not only by showing up, but by even being willing to share a meal with these men who, in every worldly sense, have been utter failures. But they won't stay that way – not for long. How about you? Maybe you struggle with some sin or other, perhaps you believe you have failed too often to be useful to the King. But isn't that saying that sin and failure are more powerful than His forgiveness? Instead, we must trust that His grace and mercy is bigger and greater and deeper than our sins. As we have sung before, Matt Papa reminds us “What patience would wait as we constantly roam / What Father so tender is calling us home / He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor / Our sins they are many His mercy is more.” Do you believe in a God who delivers this kind of mercy? Do you trust a Savior who offers this kind of grace to people like you and me?

So, our first scene: Jesus, the loving Savior, caring for His weak and sinful disciples. The second scene zeroes in on Peter and gives him the do-over he desperately needs...

**21:15-19** I realize that many folks try to make something of the different Greek words behind “love” here. This is one of those instances when knowing a little bit of Greek can be more dangerous than knowing none at all. The best studies I’ve seen show that the various words for “love” at this point in the history of the Greek language – and in the way that John himself and the Bible overall uses them – are interchangeable. So the idea that we sometimes hear that Jesus is speaking of some sort of committed love while Peter is speaking of some sort of more general love simply doesn’t hold water.

Instead, far better for us to zero in on what John himself highlights: the fact that Jesus asks Peter three times whether this disciple loves His Lord. The parallel to Peter’s three denials of Christ couldn’t be clearer – even the scene isn’t much different: there it was night, now it is early morning; there was a charcoal fire in both places; Peter was questioned three times then, he is questioned three times now. This time, Jesus calls Peter to express his love not just by affirming something, but by acting in a particular way. And acting in a way that displays that love to others. Brothers and sisters, there is a lesson for us: your words must be backed up by your actions if they are to truly express what you believe. Anybody can say they love Jesus. But the ones who actually follow – those are the genuine disciples. Do you follow? Or do you just say that you do?

Jesus goes on to explain that Peter’s declaration of love will indeed be shown to be true. The death that he will die is not, perhaps, what Peter would have sought: going out in the prime of his life in a blaze of glory, battling for the Lord. Instead, Peter would be called to a longer obedience in one, faithful direction. And, as church history notes, that long obedience would eventually end in persecution and death.

In all of this, however, pay attention to Christ's words to Peter: "Follow me." Let's read a little further, and then come back to that thought...

**21:20-25** These verses come as the conclusion to John's gospel. We read of John following Jesus – interesting, isn't that, given what Christ just called Peter to? – and Peter questions what is going to happen to John. Perhaps he asks this because Jesus just gave a sneak peak into Peter's future, and with John right there, he wonders what is in store for this other disciple.

Whatever Peter's motivation, note that Jesus refuses to give details. In short, Peter's concern needs to be about his own life and faithfulness, not in knowing all the details of the future; least of all knowing all the details about everyone else's life. This, too, is a correction for us, isn't it? Too often we want to know everything about everyone. And too often that turns into an excuse – perhaps even unintentionally, but an excuse none-the-less – to not actually do the hard work of examining and asking the Spirit to change our own lives.

In **verse 22**, the call that Jesus gives to Peter is the correction that we need also: follow Jesus! I want you to see something about discipleship here: Peter has already followed Jesus. True, he has rejected Christ, but nowhere in the Scriptures does it say that he lost his faith or anything like that. So, Christ's command isn't saying "you need to come to faith again." No, it's saying something for every Christian: you need to daily follow after your Lord. Not just one time. Not just the day you were baptized. But every day. That is what discipleship consists of. That is what John's gospel calls us to do: obeying these trustworthy words and giving our lives to follow our Savior. Praise Him that, in Christ, we are each a new creation. Whatever failures we have had can be forgiven. Whatever calling He has placed upon our lives we can continue to grow in. Even when we fail, He graciously picks us back up and sets us on the path to faithful following of Him once more. That's our gracious Savior. That's our lifelong calling. And that's the Gospel that we are to extend to others. Let's do that together, by His grace and His strength as we close in prayer and then sing praises to our Risen Savior...