Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

When we began this chapter last week we noted that this fishing miracle was done to teach disciples and all who read about the task of the church. And so, we have taken as our theme for this chapter that **Catching Fish and Feeding Sheep is the Church’s Task**. And we made the point last week that catching fish and feeding sheep are not to be thought of as two separate activities but two parts of one activity. And we will say more about that this week.

But last week we looked at the ‘catching fish’ half of the chapter. And we saw that what Jesus was doing was **illustrating** the Great Commission. Just a few days after this, He would be with the disciples on a mountain and He would say to them, “*Go… and make disciples of all nations*.” But here He illustrated that Commission by pointing out to them and us that He knows where the ‘fish’ (meaning all chosen to salvation by God) are in this world, and that if we obey His command, by telling people about sin and the Saviour, He will use this to bring the ‘fish’ into the ‘net’ of His church.

Well, that brings us to the ‘feeding sheep’ half of the chapter. And it is made up of two conversations between Jesus and Peter – the “*do you love me?*” conversation, and the conversation about how Peter would die. And we will look at these two conversations to see what they reveal about the church and the church’s task.

But before we do that, we ought to give some thought to why Peter is the focus of attention in this chapter. So we will first set the scene, as it were, by noting the Feeding Sheep Lesson from Peter’s **Prominent Activity**. Then we will look at the first conversation and consider the feeding sheep lesson from Peter’s **Gentle Restoration**. And we will finish with the feeding sheep lesson from Peter’s **Comparison Question**. And people of God, there are some powerful and beautiful truthes here about faith and forgiveness and Christian ministry, which includes official ministers, like me, and general ministers, meaning every one of us.

1. So we begin with the Feeding Sheep Lesson from Peter’s **Prominent Activity**. And boys and girls, prominent means foremost or leading or important. And as we consider what the Bible says about Peter he clearly had a prominent role among the disciples.
   1. This can be seen as we review some **highlights** from Peter’s activity in the past:
      1. Way back in John 1 we learned that Peter was originally called Simon, but Jesus changed his name to Cephas, which means Peter, which means Rock.
      2. And boys and girls, who was it that climbed out of the boat on the stormy sea to walk toward Jesus? It was Peter.
      3. And in **Matthew 16**, when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought that He was, it was Peter who replied, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* And Jesus then commended Peter’s profession of faith, saying, “*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*.”
      4. AndIn **John 6**, we read about a time when many disciples were abandoning Jesus and He asked the Twelve if they were going to abandon Him also. But Peter said, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*.”
      5. And it was Peter who had recently said to Jesus, “*Even though [the other disciples] fall away, I will not,” and “if I must die with you, I will not deny you!*”
      6. And when Jesus was arrested, it was Peter who tried to defend Him by drawing a sword. It was not the right thing to do but it was brave and his motives were good.
      7. So that is Peter’s prominent ***past*** activity.
   2. But the Book Acts gives us a record of Peter’s prominent ***future*** activity:
      1. Who stood up among the brothers and announced that a replacement for Judas needed to be chosen? Peter.
      2. And who preached the Pentecost Day sermon? Peter.
      3. And who was the one who preached to the Jewish rulers when the Apostles had been arrested? Peter.
      4. And who was the one who pronounced the judgment of the Lord on Ananias and Sapphira? Peter.
      5. And who was the one who was shown the vision of animals in a net and told to preach to the Gentiles? Peter.
      6. So Peter will still have a prominent role among the Apostles in the future.
   3. But this chapter here in John is the pivot point between Peter’s past activity and Peter’s future activity. And it is that because of one other highlight, or perhaps we should say ***low*-light**, from Peter’s past, that we have not yet mentioned. And that *low*-light is, of course, when he denied Jesus, three times, on the night that Jesus was arrested. And that three-fold denial would have been weighing very heavily on Peter’s conscience. It would have been the proverbial elephant in the room each time Jesus appeared to the disciples. And that’s what this chapter is about; this is when Peter was restored from that sin and reassigned a prominent role in the presence of the other Apostles. And that makes this moment very relevant for us today because we all struggle with sin.
      1. Some of us may also have a deeply troubled conscience because of our own serious sin; maybe you are questioning your faith and doubting your salvation; wondering how the Lord could possibly use you in His service. If so, then this chapter will be very helpful, because the very fact that Peter went on to a prominent ministry shows us that Christ can and does restore sinners to useful service.
      2. But even if we are not overwhelmed with guilt at some particular and serious failing, what we read here is a reminder that every servant of Christ is a forgiven sinner.
      3. For think about how powerful Peter’s testimony would have been – I publicly denied Jesus, three times! But He forgave me and He will forgive you too. We see the same thing with Paul. I persecuted Christians! I imprisoned them and tortured them. Some of them died! But Jesus forgave me and He will forgive you too. And I am sure you can think of books you have read or testimonies you have heard about forgiven sinners, like alcoholics or abusers or addicts or the sexually immoral, that have made a deep impression on your soul.
      4. But that begs the question, doesn’t it: Why do so many of us work so hard to give people the impression that we are sinless? Do you know what I am talking about? I am talking about Bible studies where certain sins are mentioned in the passage but no one is willing to share their struggles in that area. And that doesn’t mean we have to tell everyone, everything, all the time; there is need for wisdom. But if forgiveness is so essential to the gospel, let’s not pretend that we don’t need it! When we open up to people about our personal experience of sin and forgiveness, we aim our words at their deepest need – forgiveness!
2. Well, let’s seek this instruction and encouragement as look next at the Feeding Sheep Lesson from Peter’s **Gentle Restoration**.
   1. And very quickly, apart from Peter’s prominence in this chapter, there are two details that make it plain that what happened here was about restoring Peter:
      1. The first is in v9; it is the “**charcoal fire**” that Jesus had going when the disciples arrived on the shore. You see, there are only two mentions of a charcoal fire in the whole Bible. The other one is mentioned in ch. 18. After Peter first denied Jesus, we read that he went into a room where the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire to warm themselves. And it was there that Peter made denials two and three. So the denials took place where there was a charcoal fire and there was a charcoal fire here as Peter arrived at the shore. And I can picture Peter running up to Jesus on the shore and then noticing the charcoal fire and gulping with what it reminded him of!
      2. But the other detail that makes it plain that this moment was about restoring Peter is that **Jesus asked Peter the same question, three times**. And v17 says this as we read that Peter was grieved because [Jesus] asked this a third time.
   2. So let’s look closely at this series of questions that Jesus asked and Peter’s responses to see how Peter was restored.
      1. And the first thing to note is the name that Jesus used – **Simon**, son of John.
         1. As we noted earlier, when Jesus first met Peter, Peter was known as Simon. But Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means rock, and when Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus said that He would build His church on this rock.
         2. But when push came to shove, Peter, rather than confess Jesus, had denied Him. But you will remember that Jesus told Peter that He would deny Him before it happened. And Luke tells us that when Jesus told Peter this, He used Simon and not Peter; He said, “*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.*”
         3. And Jesus’ use of Simon now would surely have reminded Peter of that moment. But if it did, the rest of what Jesus said back then would have come to Peter’s mind also. For Jesus also said, “*And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers*.” So remembering those words and hearing what Jesus said here would have been a double encouragement to Peter.
      2. But the second thing to consider is what Jesus meant when He said, “Do you love me ***more than these*?**” And there are two possibilities – it could mean the boats and the nets of the fishing life, since they are what Peter had returned to and what he would need to put behind him, completely, or it could mean the other disciples, given that Peter had claimed that even if all the others abandoned Jesus, he would not. Well, leaving fishing would be necessary but Peter again taking a prominent role among the Apostles after this episode suggests that the other disciples is what was in view with Jesus’ question. So not only was this episode about putting the denial in the past; it was also about restoring Peter to his prominent role among the Apostles.
      3. And we see this also as we consider **the wording of the three questions & answers**.
         1. Some of you will have heard before that Jesus used two Greek words for love in the three questions. And Peter used just one of them in all of his responses. And many commentators suggest that the first word for love that Jesus used in the first two questions had the highest form of love in view while the word for love that He used in the third question had a lower form of love in view. And it was that lower form of love word that Peter used in all three of his answers.
            1. So to illustrate how those commentators view the conversation, it would have been like this: Simon, son of John, do you 100% love me more than these? Yes, Lord; you know that I 60% love you. Simon, son of John, do you 100% love me? Yes, Lord; you know that I 60% love you. Simon, son of John, do you 60% love me? Lord, you know everything; you know that I 60% love you. So the idea is that as evidence of the Lord’s patience and grace and gentleness, He lowered the required commitment level to what broken Peter felt able to commit to.
         2. But as beautiful a picture of gentle Jesus that that might be, where it falls down is that **the idea that Jesus would accept anything less than total** or wholehearted devotion is simply incompatible with who He is and the command that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And also, if Peter felt so crushed with guilt that he felt unable to commit to 100% love, then his responses would not have been, Yes, Lord, but No, Lord. And thirdly, rather than being grieved because Jesus asked this a third time, he would have been happy that Jesus, you know, came down to his ‘level.’
         3. So it is my belief that these different love words are just synonyms, which means equal words, and that they are not the big focus point of this conversation. The big focus, as the text makes clear, is that Jesus asked this question three times, in order to restore Peter.
         4. And that means that the important words in all of Peter’s answers were “*Lord*; ***You know***.” You see, with those words, Peter was confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus had told Peter that he would deny Him before it happened. And only God could know that! So Peter understood and believed that Jesus knew everything. So by saying, “*Lord; You know*,” Peter was confessing his faith in Jesus, as the Son of God, in public. So as painful as it was for Peter to hear the question asked three times, it functioned as an opportunity for Peter’s previous failure to be undone in the presence of the other disciples.
         5. And that means that the important words that Jesus said to Peter were “*Feed my lambs*,” “*Tend my sheep*,” and “*Feed my sheep*.” For with those words He was reinstating Peter to his prominent role in the presence of the other Apostles.
            1. From time to time there will be a news report about a person who has a position of responsibility in government or the military, for example, who is accused of wrongdoing and stood down from their position, pending investigation. And if the investigation shows that there was no wrongdoing, then they are reinstated to their position.
            2. Well, **the investigation into Peter’s conduct** was concluded. The verdict of the Lord? Guilty of a three-fold denial of Christ. The sentence? Forgiven and reinstated to prominent Apostle!
            3. And we have already noted that it was the same with **Paul** – the verdict of the Lord? Guilty of persecuting the church. The sentence? Forgiven and appointed Apostle to the Gentiles!
            4. And if you get the chance this week, have a read through **Hebrews 11**. It is the chapter we call ‘the heroes of faith.’ And I was talking about this with someone during the week. You see, when you examine each of those saints in the cold light of day, they were ratbags – liars, cheats, murderers, many wives, sexually immoral, idolaters, and unjust, to name a few of their sins. But the Lord’s verdict? Forgiven, men and women of faith, who served me by doing \_\_\_\_\_\_
            5. So what about you? What is the Lord’s verdict about you – guilty of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ But more importantly, what is the Lord’s sentence? Forgiven and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
3. And that’s the wonderful feeding lesson from Peter’s **Gentle Restoration**! And because Jesus emphasized the feeding of sheep as the core of Peter’s prominent role, we will finish our consideration of John’s Gospel with a short list of principles that explain how sheep are best fed. But before that, we need to briefly consider the third and last Feeding Sheep Lesson in this chapter, which arises out of Peter’s **Comparison Question**.
   1. Beginning at v18, Jesus told Peter that a part of his prominent role would be a martyr’s death. And boys and girls, a martyr is someone who is killed because of what they believe. So as John explains in v19, what Jesus said about Peter’s hands being stretched out him being dressed and carried around by others meant that he would die a martyr’s death. And even though we cannot be 100% percent sure that it happened, several historical resources say that Peter was eventually crucified. But because he felt so unworthy of the grace that he had been shown in Christ, he refused to be crucified like the Lord Jesus was and asked, instead, to be crucified upside down!
   2. Well, having learned that a martyr’s death was in his future, to his credit, Peter appears to have accepted that as part of the gratitude he owed the Lord for the grace that was shown to him. But Peter kind of **spoiled the moment** by immediately noticing the disciple who we have always identified as John, the author of this Gospel, and asking Jesus if John too would have to make the sacrifice that was expected of Peter. But Jesus responded by telling Peter that John’s future was Jesus’ business, and that Peter should instead focus on his duty to Christ.
   3. And the simple feeding sheep lesson from this conversation is that **no two servants of Christ will serve Christ in exactly the same way**. And People of God, this is a lesson we do well to learn! A common problem addressed in the NT is that followers of Jesus compared themselves with other followers of Jesus.
      1. Think of **Romans 12** and **1 Corinthians 12** where the Apostle Paul uses the illustration of the church as a body made up of many parts to remind those he was writing too that diversity in the church is God’s good design. Too be sure, there will be unity in the truth and obedience in a great many areas of church life and home life, etc, and this is not about tolerating sin, but the diversity of gifts and roles and abilities in a congregation is a healthy thing. And so, just as a body made up only of hands would not function well at all, so the church needs men and women, office-bearers and members, old and young, up front people and behind the scenes people, and those who head overseas for mission work and those who stay and serve as faithful plumbers or secretaries or lawyers or stay at home Mothers. And we must be very careful to not be constantly comparing ourselves with others, as in why can’t I do what they do? or why don’t they do as I do? and instead to focus on our duty to Christ.

Well, John ends his Gospel by emphasizing **eye-witness testimony**. Ch’s 1-20 are eye-witness testimony of thousands of people who saw Jesus’ miracles, heard Jesus’ sermons, and who saw Jesus die and rise from the dead, laid out for the reader “*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*.” And I hope that you have come to believe in Jesus as the Christ or had your faith in Jesus strengthened.

Ch. 21 is a miracle that was performed to teach the church about its task. And its task is to ‘**catch fish**,’ which means to evangelize, to make disciples, and to ‘**feed sheep**,’ which means to teach disciples everything that the Lord has commanded.

And if we were to try and put these two activities into a cute little vision statement for ARC, which seems a popular thing for churches to do today, it would be **ARC; A fishing and feeding church**. And at our annual church visitation or church Warrant of Fitness, that would be the question we have to ask and answer: Is ARC fishing and feeding? And the answer to that question will only be yes if each one of us asks it of ourselves: Am I fishing and feeding? Am I telling others about sin and forgiveness in Christ, and am I growing in knowledge and love and obedience and service?

And the absolute heart and core of both of these things is what Jesus emphasized as He restored Peter – **feed my sheep**. And this is where we end today:

* The way that disciples are **made** is by *minister* preaching and *member* preaching. People will only come to faith if they hear me preach Jesus Christ in church on Sunday or they hear you preach Jesus Christ at home or work or school during the week.
* And the way that disciples **grow** is by listening to a minister who preaches Christ from Sunday to Sunday, and they add to that their personal and family and group study of the Word of Christ.

So congregation, pray that we might be a fishing and feeding church. And may God be praised for feeding us through the Gospel of John Amen.