

My grandparents loved to get old furniture and restore it. This became more than a hobby – it was a passion. One of the most precious gifts I received from them was a cedar chest that was built in the early 1900s. With fine craftsmanship and artistry, the chest is beautiful.

But before I received this chest, my grandmother had found that it was beat up, worn, and damaged. The luster of the finish had long worn off, and the once beautiful chest was in poor condition.

With attention to detail, working over the nicks and scrapes, my grandparents sanded down, stained, and finished the chest to look absolutely gorgeous. I love opening it up and smelling the fragrance of cedar that still comes from the interior.

What makes the gospel such good news is that sinners can not only be forgiven but also restored. Made in the image of God, we have been damaged by original sin that occurred at the Fall, and the glory of our Creator has been badly marred.

In John 21, one of the most moving scenes of the Gospel comes into view. And it is the picture of restoration by the Lord Jesus. Anyone who would come to him by faith would find that he restores life – even those who have failed, disappointed, and denied Jesus.

See the welcoming embrace of Jesus

When we come to this scene, we recall that Peter had taken 6 other disciples out with him on the Sea of Tiberias and they had spent the night casting their fishing nets but catching nothing. As the morning light began to break the darkness, the disciples came close to shore and saw someone cooking breakfast. Upon realizing that it was Jesus, Peter flung himself over the side of the boat, swam to shore, and went to Jesus.

And there, by the fire, Jesus feeds Peter. Fresh bread has been baked. Fresh fish has been cooked. And here is how Jesus welcomes and receives sinners – without a sense of harshness, condemnation, or accusation. He prepares a meal. Come and eat. You are welcome here.

There is something about Jesus that drew sinners to himself. Like Peter, they would rush headlong to him. In Luke 15, we are told that tax collectors and sinners came to him and ate with him. He had this way about him. What is it?

Sinners, like Peter, felt this full-hearted, unrestrained compassion of Jesus. As human beings tainted by the Fall, we struggle to show full compassion. We hesitate. We protect ourselves. We are restrained so that we can protect ourselves and keep ourselves from being badly hurt.

But with Jesus, there is no restraint. He holds back nothing of the compassion. This is the reason that Paul could say that God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3). The very nature of God is that he abounds in mercy. Thomas Goodwin, the 17th century puritan pastor, would say that God has “a multitude of mercies of every kind” (Goodwin, *Works* 2:187-88).

But, you might object, that is speaking about the Father. Is Jesus like that? John records for us Jesus’ own words to the disciples in Jn. 14:9-10, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father....Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” The breakfast on the shore is the invitation that says, “Come, eat with me.”

For too many of us, we have an idea that Jesus is glad to forgive us, but deep down there must be some reluctance. If only I would get my act together and quit sinning, maybe I wouldn’t be such a disappointment to him. But this is not how the NT portrays Christ. He is full of compassion. His heart is tender to sinners who come broken and needy. And in our ugliness of sin, it is not our loveliness that wins his love, but our unloveliness.

This is not how the world works! It’s not how our hearts work. We expect expressions of disappointment, regret, shaming. But the very character of Jesus is this wide embrace. Like the Father of the prodigal son, he prepares a feast of celebration for one sinner who repents and is full of joy that his lost son has returned home.

See the restoring embrace of Jesus

The details of this account are striking with Peter’s denial. Peter had denied Jesus three times. Jesus now restores Peter with three questions, giving Peter three opportunities to confess. Peter had denied the Lord by a charcoal fire; Jesus restores Peter by a charcoal fire. And Luke tells us that upon Peter’s third denial, Jesus turned and looked at Peter (Lk. 22:58-61).

Now, over the fire, with a welcoming breakfast, Jesus speaks to Peter. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Jesus returns to his old name, Simon. The name Simon comes from the word “to listen” or “to hear,” whereas the name Peter comes from the word meaning “the rock.” Simon Peter, the one who had been full of confidence and zeal, the one who could say, “I’ll never deny you Lord!” is now faced with the call to listen again. His steadfastness as a rock has been shown to be shaky at best. And now, Jesus gently shows Peter how weak he is.

How resolved is Peter’s devotion to the Lord? Jesus asks him, “Do you love me more than these?” It’s not clear what Jesus means when he asks, “Do you love me more than these?” What does “these” refer to? The fish? The fishing? The other disciples?

The Welcoming and Restoring Embrace of Jesus – Jn. 21:15-19 Andrew Hall
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While it isn't clear to us, we can reimagine the scene. There is Peter with the other 6 disciples standing by the fire after an enormous catch of fish. And now, three times, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter responds, "Yes Lord, you know I love you."

But upon that third time, Peter is grieved. His heart is torn open. And upon that third question, as Jesus asks again, Peter says, "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you!" Three times he denied Christ. Three times he confesses.

But do you notice the appeal of Peter's final confession? "Lord, you know everything!" He appeals to the all-knowing nature of his Lord. He appeals to the fact that Jesus can look deeper into Peter's heart than Peter can. He doesn't appeal to his sincerity, but to Jesus' sovereignty. And in confessing again, Jesus repeats what he has said over and over – "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep."

Richard Sibbes, the pastor who trained Thomas Goodwin, understood the very heart of Christ. He knew that sinners would wonder if Jesus would fully forgive without reservation or hesitation. And when Sibbes gazed at Jesus, he could only see the overflowing nature of mercy and grace of Christ. So Sibbes would say, "There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." As large as our sins are, as various our fallings can be, and as low as we can stumble, his mercy is more, his compassion is deeper, and his reach is greater.

How can Jesus' embrace be so welcoming and restoring? His nature is mercy. That is his natural disposition. Punishment is the strange work of Christ; mercy is the natural state of his heart.

What will make you run to Jesus? What will cause you to go to Jesus? Is it not the large-ness of his mercy? Is it not that his mercy is abounding? He is the Son of the Father of all compassion and mercies.

And what Jesus does with sinners who fail spectacularly is that he takes the worn down, broken, dented and dulled soul, and he restores it. Oh, it will feel painful to confess, just like sandpaper on an old wooden chest. But as painful as the sanding and confessing may be, the beauty of his restoring work is that he takes sinners and makes them even better than they could have imagined – he makes them like himself and then sends them out with the love and compassion of the Father so that you and I might welcome and receive sinners like Christ received us.