

GOING DEEPER
DISCUSSION GUIDE
May 4, 2014

**Brand
New
Day**



Discussion Guide

No Regrets in the Present

John 21.15-19

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Do you personally think it is fair to use a person's past to evaluate their potential performance in the present? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to set the scene and to explain the context for John 20-21. You might consider reading John 20.11-21.14 aloud so that people in your group might have the flow of the story before them. Be sure to point out that in spite of Jesus' charge to the disciples (John 20.21), the disciples appear to be moving backward (John 21.3) and that Peter is leading the retreat.

- Read John 21.15-19 aloud slowly, seeking to experience and imagine the scene unfolding. Pause and read John 21.15-19 aloud slowly once more, seeking to be present and to experience the scene as Peter.
- What was it like for you to experience the text as Peter?
- In what ways, if any, did Jesus address Peter's past? His present?
- Peter appears to be stuck in the present because of his failure in the past (three-fold denial of Jesus). When have you witnessed others become stuck in the present because of their own past failures? In your opinion, what is it about past failures that weigh us down in the present? Could you explain?
- What do you learn about Jesus' intentions and character from the way in which he addresses Peter's past and present? In what ways does this portrayal of Jesus fit with who you understand Jesus to be?
- Have you ever experienced a time in which you got stuck in the present because of something you did in the past? What was this like for you?
- In what areas, if any, do you presently feel stuck because of what transpired in the past?
- Read John 21.15-19 aloud once more, listening to the text as if Jesus is speaking directly to you. Sit for a few moments with Jesus and allow him to speak whatever else he needs to say to you.
- Conclude your time by sharing your experiences and lifting one another up in prayer.

Context and Background

Love

Much discussion has been had over the meaning of the word “love,” particularly the New Testament terms used to denote this expression of devotion. The authors of the New Testament had three main choices of Greek words to use for the word “love”: eros, phileo, and agape. Some scholars, and many more pastors looking to drive home a point, have argued that the New Testament authors chose to use agape to refer to the highest order of love (God’s love) while choosing to use phileo to refer to lower orders of love. However, such distinctions among these Greek terms is not rooted in reality but rather in the use of John 21.15-17 as a proof text.

It is true that the biblical authors seem to prefer the use of agape but they did so in keeping with the common Greek usage of their time. From the fourth century B.C. onward, authors preferred to use agape over phileo because the later had picked up the additional meaning of “to kiss” which was associated with another Greek verb that implied impregnating a woman. However, the authors of the New Testament are far from consistent in their use of agape or phileo. In his Gospel, John uses both interchangeably. He uses both terms to refer to the love the Father has for Jesus (John 3.35; 5.20). He also uses both terms to refer to the love Jesus had for Lazarus (John 11.5; 11.36). Further, Peter and Jesus use these terms interchangeably in their seaside discussion (John 21.15-17). The Apostle Paul comes the closest to imparting special meaning to the verb agapao but even he uses the verb to reference Demas’ love for the world (2 Timothy 4.10). The textual evidence simply does not support a strong difference of meaning between the verbs phileo and agapao. At best, the textual evidence supports a move in the New Testament to a deeper understanding of love as demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus, but this deeper understanding is not seen in the use of terms. So where did the idea of different meanings, specifically, the idea of agape being Divine love, come from?

Interestingly, this idea arose in the 19th century from a debate between British biblical scholars. Before this time, the only person who thought he

saw any difference between the biblical terms for love was Origen. However, every interpreter until the 19th century, including key Reformation scholars like Erasmus and Grotius, saw no such distinction. In the 19th century a debate emerged between two scholars, Trenchard and Wescott, as to different shades of meaning between phileo and agapao, but even these two great scholars did not agree. It is therefore best to allow context, rather than a single word, to guide our interpretation of texts which include differing terms for love, as context, rather than individual words, is always the most important interpretive tool in understanding the flow and meaning of any text.

The Text

John 21.15-19: *But I did this thing, once. . .*

After Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene (John 20.11-17), one would expect that the disciples would move forward with joy and praise at what they had witnessed. However, one week after they had first seen Jesus, the disciples remained behind locked doors struggling with issues of faith (John 21.24-29). Jesus appeared, once more, to his disciples, demonstrating that even locked doors were not enough to keep him out, and wished them peace (John 20.26). It seems that the disciples needed and Jesus wished to provide further encouragement so that these men might step forward out of their fear.

The disciples did step out, but not forward. They appear to step backwards, following the leadership of Peter to return to fishing. This move is somewhat baffling. Jesus has appeared twice to his disciples, demonstrating they have nothing to fear from the Jewish leaders and calling them to carry out his mission and message. Yet, Peter returned to his former occupation of fishing, taking six other disciples with him. Something seemed to be holding Peter back from answering Jesus’ charge, so it is not surprising that Jesus appeared once more to his disciples and specifically singled out Peter. After a brief exchange involving fish (and the disciples’ seeming inability to catch them) the disciples recognized Jesus and sat down for a meal with him. After this meal, Jesus pulled Peter aside in

order to address what was holding him back from moving forward.

Jesus' discussion with Peter involved three questions about Peter's love for Jesus coupled with a three-fold charge to shepherd Jesus' followers (sheep). Much has been made about the differing verbs employed by John, but the emphasis within the text is not on the verbs used but on the three-fold repetition, a point John himself makes (John 21.17). (See Love.) For some reason, Jesus was intent on drawing Peter into this three-fold question and answer discussion.

The key clue as to Jesus' intent can be found in Jesus' first question, a question in which Jesus inquired as to whether Peter loved him more than "these." The context implies the antecedent to be the other disciples; that is, Jesus asked if Peter loved him more than the other disciples. This question is a clear echo of Peter's own claim to have a love and devotion to Jesus which excelled that of the other disciples (John 13.37-38; Matthew 26.31-35). In response to Peter's boast of devotion, Jesus had replied that Peter would deny him three times. Thus, this question is a direct attempt to address Peter's boast. Did Peter really love Jesus? Peter replied affirmatively, to which Jesus responded with a pastoral charge. Peter was to feed Jesus' lambs. This reply was more than a charge but a further touching upon Peter's denial, for this charge echoes Jesus' own claim to be a good shepherd, one who did not abandon his sheep when trouble arose (John 10.11-13). More than likely, Jesus intended this pastoral charge to be restorative. Peter was to be a good shepherd and to leave his abandoning ways behind him. However, Jesus was not finished. He twice more inquired as to Peter's love coupling his questions with pastoral charges. The third question distressed Peter, probably because Peter understood Jesus' intent. Three times Peter denied Jesus and three times Jesus asked about Peter's love. Jesus was allowing Peter to recant his three-fold denial with a three-fold affirmation of love.

The real question is what was behind Jesus' line of questioning? The answer appears in the discussion which follows.

Jesus described to Peter what would be Peter's demise and then invited him to follow, using the words he first spoke to Peter inviting him to be a disciple (Mark 1.17). With these words, Jesus extended the invitation for Peter to start over, providing the opportunity for Peter to make good on his promise to die for Jesus. Effectively, in this conversation, Jesus restored Peter by removing the stigma of Peter's past denials, offering him a new opportunity to move forward as a disciple.

Application:

Sometimes we mess up. Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we fail. Our past shortcomings can be big or small, but the reality is that we all remember them. We remember when we were less than what we expected to be, less than what we promised to be. It is the memory of these past "less-than" experiences that can bind us in the present. Memories of past failings can keep us from moving forward in the present. We are not worthy, able, or willing to move forward because of what happened in the past. The resurrection of Jesus addresses this present binding we experience by releasing us from our past. The resurrected Jesus draws near and addresses our past, not to judge, but to rehabilitate. He speaks directly to our failings as he provides new direction and the freedom to move in that direction.

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