

the dorm after a discussion with my roommate over whether or not firecrackers went off underwater. He needed to know this, since I had to come up with the money to cover the damage. The second issue pressing my heart was Martie and the fact I had found the one I wanted to marry. Or, more precisely and more convincingly to my father, that the Lord had led me to the most wonderful woman in the whole world—the one I wanted to be with for the rest of my life.

I am sure Dad couldn't quite put together the sharp contrast between someone who blows up toilets to settle an argument and someone who is at the same time mature enough to be so sure about his life partner. But to his credit, Dad took both pieces of news in stride.

What troubled me was not what my father said about the underwater experiment, but what he asked me about Martie. He asked how I knew I was in love. I remember giving him a list of her unsurpassed qualities and then feeling totally inadequate to describe and define how I really felt about her. Trying to describe and define love is like trying to explain how a great golf shot feels or what the sound of a shallow, quick babbling brook does for your soul.

Which is why the question of a graduate student left me feeling so inadequate.

WHAT DOES LOVE MEAN?

As we chatted over a cup of coffee, the student asked me the ultimate question, "What does it *really* mean to love God?" He could not have asked a more profoundly important question. I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised at the question, given that he was a graduate student in theology. But in fairness to him, my guess is that most of us faced with the same question would have a difficult time coming up with a clear and concise answer that could be readily transferred to life.

I felt inadequate because trying to define love, particularly love for the Divine, is bound to injure our understanding of it. Some things are too grand and too rich to try to reduce them to a definitive statement. Quarantining love into the confines of even the worthiest definition threatens to leave it flat and dull.

The brilliance and beauty of love are expressed and experienced in as many ways as there are people. Some of us enjoy and express it cognitively while others get in touch with it emotionally. Love is expressed by some in intangible ways, and by others in the tangible world of words, songs, and flowers. A wink across a crowded room can carry the power of a nuclear explosion in the heart of the recipient. For someone else, only a dozen red roses or a box of chocolates will do.

Yet the reality that love defies description does not mean we are left to love any old way we please. Love does have *boundaries*. Having an affair may be about making love or feeling loved, but it is not a loving act in the end, certainly not to our spouse, children, and others to whom we are responsible. Living for self and ignoring the needs and expectations of those around me may be about self-love, but it is not real love.

There is a richness to love that is to be pursued if we are to enjoy its benefits to the full.

Moreover, love is about more than boundaries. If we are to master the art of loving, we must do more than simply stay within the boundaries. There is a richness to love that is to be *pursued* if we are to enjoy its benefits to the full. Marriage, for example, is best experienced not as a duty with limits, but as a pursuit of a relationship that is filled with the kind of affection and adoration that propel us toward pleasing our partner in loving acts of service and sometimes sacrifice.

Scripture teaches that cultivating a love relationship with Christ follows the same pattern. God's Word sets clear boundaries for our love to Him and a target within the boundary for us to pursue. It's like archery. The aim is not just to stay within the concentric circles (though that is better than missing the target altogether), but to zero in on the bull's-eye.

BLESSING THE BOUNDARIES

If you and I were to tackle the seminarian's question today, we most likely would emphasize the boundaries—love as a responsibility. Our

conversation would affirm the fact that loving Christ is the most important issue in our relationship with Him. In His earliest revelation, God told the Israelites, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5). We would underscore that this is not an option but a command . . . and our primary responsibility in the relationship.

To stress the importance of this responsibility, we would note Jesus' answer when the religious lawyer asked Him which of the commandments is the greatest (Matt. 22:34–40). Jesus replied that God's first and foremost expectation is that we should love Him with the totality of our being. The fact that Jesus used the Greek word *agape* to describe this love means He is looking for a love that is grounded in choice and not emotion, a love capable of performing in spite of how we feel. And since this love is a choice, we will be held responsible for whether we have chosen to love Him.

Our discussion would also have to include Jesus' last conversation with Peter. Jesus asked Peter three times whether or not he loved Him, which clearly demonstrates that our love for Christ is of primary importance to Him. Indeed, we would note that loving Christ is so important that He has promised a crown reward "to those who love him" (James 1:12). And we would note that Scripture describes our love for Him in terms such as yieldedness, sacrifice, surrender, and obedience.

Having tackled the challenge of defining our love for Christ so thoroughly, we would no doubt feel quite satisfied to have theologized and biblicized our way through the issue. But we are not really done yet. I am embarrassed to admit that for years I have taught that loving Christ is simply about the surrender of our will. As children of the Enlightenment we find great pleasure in rationally analyzing and defining our way through life. Yet, if we are not careful, we leave little room for the intangible mysteries and nuances that can fill us with the beauty of the depth and breadth of love as a living experience.

I agree with John Calvin, who insisted that truth about God is not merely intended to "flit about in our brains," but to touch our affec-

tions as well. For me, the joy of loving Martie is not in knowing the definitions and the importance of my love for her, but in the experience of my relationship with her as a person.

For the forgiven woman, loving Jesus was more than a duty; it was an expression of devotion.

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

If the forgiven woman who poured out her love at the feet of Jesus were to pull up a chair and join our conversation with the seminarian, she no doubt would nod her head in agreement with all that we said about loving Christ—but she would not be satisfied with such a one-sided perspective. She would want to take us beyond our analysis of love as a *responsibility* to the significance of love as a *response*. For her, loving Jesus was more than a duty; it was an expression of devotion. She would tell us of a love that is stimulated by a deep sense of awe, affection, and adoration; of a love that is willing to do risky and radical things if necessary to express a heart of unquenchable gratitude; of gratitude for the fact that although she had lived all of her life with the burden of her sin, yet now she is free and has found someone who truly cares for her and is the liberator of her soul. She would tell us in no uncertain terms that, for her, loving Jesus is more than an item on her list of what she ought to do, but rather a matter of what she wants to do. She would have spoken with an intensity and passion not found in the rather cerebral analysis that we "Bibleboomers" often bring to the discussion.

I wonder whether the difference between this woman's heartfelt love and our more studied relationship to Christ stems from the fact that we don't feel that we have been forgiven much. Is the root of our dilemma that we see ourselves as basically good people? Is it that our relationship with Christ has not been fashioned from the sludge of life because we have met Him on a higher plane? If that is our view, then sharing space with this woman at Jesus' feet will be a difficult challenge.

My dad grew up on a farm in south central Michigan. His boyhood was all about the hard, dirty work of walking the plow behind two workhorses, clearing the forest of trees and the fields of rocks. The St. Joe River, as they affectionately called it, was his source of recreation. He fished from its banks and swam in it in the buff on hot summer days.

Dad was also the first member of his family to go to college, which was a big deal since no one from the time that our family helped pioneer that area of Michigan had even considered it an option. What most of the Stowell clan didn't realize is that the day Dad left for college would be his last day on the farm. God put my dad in other fields—fields of men and women whom he would lead to Christ and shepherd as a faithful pastor.

But as the adage goes, You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. Dad loved his garden. During my childhood our home was on a large tract of land lined by beautiful gardens with dozens of varieties of perennials and his favorite rosebushes. He spent much of his leisure time tending and grooming his little Eden. It was one of the ways in which he stepped out of the stress of his pastoral work.

I didn't grow up on a farm. I grew up in North Jersey, where work was having a paper route to make a little extra money and play was with a ball, bat, and glove with buddies at the park. My Dad's love of gardening periodically led to a collision of interests.

Often—too often for me—my dad would tell me that I needed to spend part of my Saturday with him in the garden. Weeding needed to be done. The flowers had to be deadheaded. There was edging to do and that ever-present purgatory of digging the dandelions out of the lawn. I must say that I usually complied—as though I had a choice—but rarely with a willing spirit. It became particularly painful when my friends would ride by on their bikes on the way to the park while I was working in the yard.

But today I would give anything to have those days back again. Now that I am older, I have a far deeper understanding of the signifi-

cance of my father in my life. I owe so much to him. If I could go back, I would gladly serve with him in the garden, not from the drudgery of duty, but from a heart of devotion. I would even want to get up early and have him find me already at work. From my perspective today, weeding would be a great way to say to my dad, "Thanks for all you have done. I love you!" And Dad would clearly know that I loved him in more ways than words and cards on Father's Day.

So it is with Christ. As important as the definitions and dogmas are, loving Christ is richer by far than simply coming to grips with the mechanics that describe our love for Him. If our love is to be true and transforming even in the toughest of times, it must be a responsibility that we fulfill as a *response* to His amazing love and marvelous grace that has been poured out in our lives. This is exactly what John has in mind when he writes, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

We are prone to live out our Christianity at the margins, wanting or wishing we could be free to play at life as others do.

DUTY OR DEVOTION?

It seems to me that much of what we do for God arises out of a sense of obligation and duty. Being good is the way we are supposed to be, so we conform. We are prone to live out our Christianity at the margins, wanting or wishing we could be free to play at life as others do. We curiously envy the unrestrained pleasure that we see in those who love themselves, but we nevertheless stay in the yard to do the tasks our Father has given us. Worse yet, some of us have run from the yard of His love to head for the park where we can play the games we want to play and fashion life after our own dreams and desires. And all the while we feel entitled to the benefits of being His child.

interest, the “idol and king” of his life, now becomes a means to serve God humbly.¹

Michelangelo was overwhelmed with the touch of redemption and never recovered from the encounter.

Simon the Pharisee never made this turn. In fact, he would have been shocked to think that his life did not please God. What is troubling is that his good behavior and lack of love for Christ may give us a clue about ourselves—if we are willing to see ourselves in the mirror of his well-intentioned but deeply flawed attitudes and reactions.

But then, seeing ourselves as we really are is a difficult assignment. We rationalize and excuse our weaknesses and sins. We quickly forget the conviction of the Word. We resist the accurate criticisms of spouse and friends. We tend to wrap our lives in a shroud of self-deceit that keeps us feeling quite good about ourselves.

We have all seen people on beaches and in other public places whose garb looks strange, and we wonder whether they have looked in the mirror that morning. After sitting in church behind a lady in an outrageous hat, Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, couldn't resist writing,

Would to God the gift to give us
To see ourselves as others see us.

Marlie had been after me for months about my putting on weight, and I, quite frankly, didn't get it. I felt fine, ate well, and slept well, and my friends still liked me—so what was the big deal? The big deal was stepping out of the shower one day and catching a glance of my true condition in the mirror. That reality check made me admit that Marlie had a point. If I had any self-respect, I needed to change my life habits.

Simon is a mirror. We may not see ourselves as the exact replica of his image, but his self-absorbed response to Christ may very well tell the story of why we live blindly on in our own loveless rituals and religious habits.

AN UNUSUAL DINNER GUEST

I find myself wondering why Simon would have invited Jesus to dinner in the first place. As a Pharisee Simon was certainly aware of how popular Jesus had become with the masses, and he would have been deeply disturbed by Jesus' disruptive and dangerous teaching. The large following that Jesus was generating threatened the power base of religious leaders like Simon. In addition, the freshness of the truth that Jesus taught left Simon's oppressive codes and traditions sounding stuffy and bureaucratic.

The news that Jesus was coming to town would not have made Simon's day. As the local religious expert, for him to ignore such a popular person as Jesus would have been a political mistake. Jesus' credentials as a teacher were unparalleled. Everywhere He went, He attracted crowds. The reports of His miracles had authenticated His claims. For Jesus to be coming his way was a big occasion for the town—and a big problem for Simon. No doubt he lost some sleep over the ramifications of Jesus' visit.

*Simon had a lot to lose from Jesus' intrusion.
Unfortunately, his entrenched perspectives didn't
permit him to recognize that it also meant he had
Christ to gain.*

Most troubling were the potential ramifications for Simon personally. The problem with opening our lives fully to Christ is that He tends to threaten the control and comfort of our well-ordered existence, and that was the case with Simon. If the townspeople were to adopt the teachings of Jesus and turn their hearts to follow Him, much of Simon's teaching would be discredited, his power and influence would diminish, and his hypocrisy and oppressive policies would be exposed. He had a lot to lose from Jesus' intrusion into his domain. Unfortunately, his

entrenched perspectives didn't permit him to recognize that it also meant he had Christ to gain. He had no connection to the reality that all loss in the face of winning Christ is no loss at all.

In light of these dynamics, the fact that he invited Jesus to dinner cannot go unnoticed. To eat with someone in those days was a symbol of friendship and social acceptance. That is why the Pharisees were shocked that this one who claimed to be the Messiah would eat with sinners. They threw that charge in His face all the time.

We should not assume that the invitation arose out of the goodness of Simon's heart. The social customs of the first century would all but require him to entertain important visitors to his town. To snub Jesus would alienate the townsfolk, making a bad situation even worse for Simon.

It is tempting to think, however, that maybe Simon was *intrigued* by Jesus. If you were religious, you could not help but wonder about a person like Jesus. We have all been surprised at how our opinions about people mellow when we have had the opportunity to spend time with them. After hearing Jesus, Simon may have been struck with the sincerity and insight that marked His messages. And of course, he wouldn't have been the first Pharisee to be thus impressed. If Simon wanted to discuss the issues Jesus had raised in his heart, the most natural thing for him to do would be to invite the rabbi to his evening meal. The dinner would provide a forum away from the pushy, noisy crowds to delve into the real issues Jesus had raised. If the evening went as planned, Simon would be able to discern whether Jesus was indeed the prophet He claimed to be.

But to do so was not without risks. Evening meals of the type Simon provided were high-profile events. As we have noted, they were open for noninvitees to come and go as they wished. Eavesdropping on the discussions of important people made for a great night out. Topics would range from politics to civil issues to theology and just about anything else that the invited guests wanted to discuss.

The guests on this evening would have included other influential people from the town. Simon was providing a forum to get to know

this intriguing national phenomenon. Jesus would undoubtedly be the center of attention throughout the evening. This kind of setting would cause friends to ask the guests for days afterward, "What was He like? What did He say? What do you think of Him now?" Probably some of Simon's disciples and followers would have been either at the table or among those gathered to listen and watch.

What if Jesus' persuasive powers won the hearts of the influential leaders at the table—to say nothing of the standing-room-only crowd? To show disapproval of Jesus in any way would isolate the Pharisee. The ramifications were many and weighty.

Moreover, inviting Jesus to dinner entailed a risk because the tension between Jesus and the religious establishment was no small secret. The fact that the sinful woman had heard that Jesus would be there indicates how much commotion the invitation had caused among the townspeople.

Whatever the reason and in spite of the risks, Simon had taken a move toward Jesus. In so doing, he was on the brink. He would unwittingly have the potential redeemer of his soul at his table. He didn't know it, but this was the most important dinner party he had ever thrown.

It is here that we may begin to see glimmers of ourselves in Simon's dealings with Jesus.

THE COMFORTABLE DISTANCE

The text doesn't attempt to hide Simon's rudeness. The fact that he doesn't have a servant wash Jesus' feet is a dead giveaway. Footwashing is as common as hanging up a visitor's coat. Nor does Simon greet Jesus with a kiss on the cheek or forehead—the equivalent of a handshake. Surely every other guest has been shown these common courtesies.

The fact that Jesus has not been anointed is less noticeable since one would only anoint a guest who is worthy of special honor—this omission in itself an indication of Simon's attitude toward Jesus.

Why does Simon, having invited Jesus for dinner, treat him so rudely? Clearly, he's playing politics. For all the critics of the invitation—and there are many among Simon's peers—he has made a statement. To

those who disapprove, Simon has a defense. He could say that on the one hand it was important to invite this celebrity, but on the other hand he didn't wash His feet or give Him a kiss. And, he could say, "I never anointed Him as an honored guest," which he would have done for every other VIP who had been invited to his table.

So, for all the benefits of having Jesus as a guest, Simon is keeping a comfortable distance. He is careful not to let Jesus' presence threaten his position, power, or standing with friends and colleagues. More importantly, his actions have created a buffer zone in which he can wiggle to maneuver and control the evening and all its ramifications.

Here is where a glance into the mirror might cause us a measure of discomfort. When our identity with Christ and the accompanying commitments begin to threaten our peace, reputation, relationships, or prosperity, it often serves us well to keep Him at a comfortable distance.

I am reminded of Peter's quick distancing of himself from Jesus when the people around the fire accused him of being one of Christ's followers. What was it that intimidated Peter? Damaging his image among those around him? The fear that being implicated with Christ might put his own life in jeopardy? After all, Jesus had just warned His disciples that they would be thrown out of the synagogues and persecuted for His name's sake. So for Peter it was easier to keep his relationship with Christ far from the public view and to outwardly deny Him.

Granted, some of us wouldn't be quite as blatant about setting the distance. Our denials are often far more subtle. Having the opportunity to witness to someone who has power over us or could turn one's back on us or could set tongues wagging may tempt us to set a distance to protect ourselves. Often when I am on a plane, I read my Bible. I tend to wonder what the guy next to me will think. If we are intimidated in a situation like that, we may well set the distance and shield our identity with Christ. In the workplace you may feel that being too open about your faith is far too risky in terms of your colleagues' esteem and your future advancement. Some relationships would evaporate if we let Christ really manage our values and actions. Our dreams and plans would be threatened. Our love for money and all the freedom it gives

of marriage, had stayed in Hong Kong as a missionary. She was on her way to Mongolia (on an airline that serves yak as the entrée) to spend a week with some other missionaries, to be a resource and encouragement to them.

We had lunch with Dave and Theresa Magee. They and their two teenage children had only been in Hong Kong for three months. Dave left a lucrative legal career in Chicago, attended seminary, then became the pastor of an English-speaking church in Hong Kong. We also met a veteran missionary couple who have served Christ in Hong Kong for over thirty-five years. They told us they were ready to retire from the mission. When we asked what they would do after retirement they beamed to tell us they were going to go into mainland China to plant a church.

Somehow, it seems to me that Christ knows He is loved deeply by people like these. They are driven by what drives Him, and they are committed to what He is committed to.

A pastor friend recently told me of a couple in his church who, deciding they had made enough money, sold everything to open an AIDS clinic to reach out in Christ's name to some of the neediest people. In the same conversation he mentioned a businessman in his church who turned down a lucrative and much-sought-after promotion because it meant the amount of travel would take him away from his children too much of the time.

Not all of us will be called to such radical and risky expressions of love for Christ, but He still is always interested in our love for Him. A quick glance at our Daytimer, checkbook ledger, or social calendar will probably reveal quite accurately whether Christ would be forced to ask us the question He asked Peter.

BEHIND THE QUESTIONS

The fact that Jesus confronts Peter in such a direct and demanding way indicates that He might suspect that Peter doesn't love Him as much as he should. Just asking the question suggests that there is a prob-

lem. If your spouse meets you at the door as you come home and in serious tones looks in your eyes and asks, "Do you love me? I really need to know if you love me," you immediately know something is wrong.

And in this scene with Peter, something is. The real story behind the triple quiz lies not within the words but rather in the reason Jesus had to ask the questions in the first place. When we discover what went wrong in Peter's life, we discover what may be wrong in ours as well.

Earlier in the story, Peter tells a group of the disciples he is going fishing (John 21:3). It becomes clear that he is not talking about a day off to relax on the other end of a fishing pole. Jesus would not censure Peter for that, for He often went off by Himself to rest awhile. We need space to replenish our souls when we become weary.

What Peter is saying to Nathaniel, James, John, and the others is that he is going back to life as it had been before he met Jesus—to a career in fishing. The other disciples agree and get into the boats with Peter. James and John knew the drill well, for they too had been fishermen before Jesus called them to His ministry.

This was Peter's second major failure. After three years of following Jesus, he was going back to life as usual. For him the gig was up and he would now go off mission, off calling, and off message and return to his previous interests and energies.

While a lot of press is given to Peter's betrayal less than a month earlier, little attention seems to focus on this backtracking in his life. Yet, in some respects this could be the most serious of his failures. Not that his betrayal of Christ was not a serious sin—it was. But it was so wrong that it immediately caught the attention of Peter's heart, and he was filled with sorrow. The treachery in this second failure is that Peter might assume that this switch back to his earlier life is hardly a problem.

It is the subtlety of this move that is so frightening. In one sense, the consequences of Peter's "return-to-life-as-usual" move are far more detrimental to his life than his denial. If Peter reneges on Jesus' calling in his life, who will speak so convincingly at the feast of Pentecost? Who

will carry the gospel to the Gentiles? Who will find hope that impetuous, vacillating, unsteady people can be greatly used of God?

In fairness to Peter, we must admit that it is not hard to understand why he is ready to go off mission at this point in his life. First, he undoubtedly is disappointed and confused about what Jesus is up to now that His death and resurrection have taken place. Peter has seen Jesus only twice since the resurrection, and then only in brief encounters, as when He showed up through locked doors (John 20:19, 26). For three years Peter was close to Jesus, caught up in the crescendoing popularity of His leader. Peter had often stepped out in front of the others to do whatever Jesus wanted.

Now everything has changed. Peter doesn't know where Jesus is staying or what He is doing between His rare, brief appearances. Waiting uninformed in the wings, hoping that maybe something big will break, goes against every fiber of Peter's impetuous nature. Not only is he disappointed and confused, but his material needs also loom largely in front of him. Where will he get food to eat? How will he buy the clothes he will soon need? After all, that scoundrel Judas absconded with all the funds. Peter had always trusted Jesus for these things—but now it is time to fend for himself.

So, disappointed and distracted by earthly needs, he and the others decide to go back to the nets they had so willingly left three years ago.

Scripture tells us that they fish all night and catch nothing (John 21:5). Now, I guess it's all right to get "skunked," as my dad used to say, if you are on vacation. But if it's your first day back in business and you catch nothing, it's a big deal.

There has to be a sense of disillusionment setting in as the darkness gives way to the early morning light. Realizing that their best-laid plans and long, hard efforts have been to no avail, Peter and the others are missing the sense of excitement they used to feel when they hauled in nets full of fish.

There is a pattern here that needs to catch our attention. Our plans for advancing our own destinies and prosperity, if they are not

driven by our calling in Christ, always end up as empty, disillusioning pursuits.

So this first night back to their career is far spent, the disciples are exhausted, the sea is glassed by the early morning calm, and the seven used-to-be followers of Jesus have to be quietly wondering why their nets are empty. As the light breaks, do the hillsides that cascade down to the water's edge remind them of the time Jesus fed the five thousand on these hills and of how hungry they are becoming? Do they wonder what they will do after investing nearly three years of their lives with the Messiah? If that is what is occupying their minds, they don't have to wonder much longer.

As the early morning haze that wraps the shore begins to lift, Jesus appears on the beach and calls out, "Friends, you do not have any fish, do you?" (Jesus never asks questions because He doesn't know the answer; He asks questions to get people's attention and drive a point home.) Not recognizing this person, the disciples answer that the assumption is correct—they have caught nothing. He then says, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find a catch." They follow His recommendation and cannot haul the fish in because the catch is so great.

John turns to Peter and says, "It is the Lord!"

When Peter realizes who it is, he throws his robe on and jumps into the sea to swim to meet Jesus—a typical Peter move as he leaves the rest of the crew to fight their way to the shore, dragging their now strained nets bulging with fish.

One wonders why Peter was so quick to go overboard to meet Christ.

This has to be a very poignant moment for Peter. This scenario had happened once before. Interestingly enough, it was this exact kind of miracle that led to his call to follow Jesus and fish for men in the first place (Luke 5:1–11). At that time, as Jesus was teaching, the crowd was pressing Him closer and closer to the sea. He asked some fishermen if they would row Him out into the sea so He can teach away from the

press of the crowd. They gladly comply. One of them was Peter. When Jesus had finished teaching, He said to the fishermen, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." They replied that they had fished all night and had caught nothing, but, nevertheless, they would do as He said. Upon letting their nets down, they caught so many fish that their nets began to break and their boat began to sink.

Peter was so struck with the authority and power of Christ that he fell down at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!" But Jesus reassured Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." And then he and his friends brought their boats to land and left everything and followed Him.

There isn't a chance in the world that Peter doesn't remember the stunning encounter he had with Jesus three years earlier. And it is no coincidence that Jesus finds Peter, on the very night he has decided to go back to being a fisherman, and replicates the miracle. Jesus is graphically confronting Peter with the moment of his call. To Peter, who has just gone off calling and off mission, this encounter reminds him of the day he gave up everything to follow Jesus. And we have to ask Peter, "What has changed? Has the calling changed? Has Jesus changed? Or have you changed?" If Peter had been disappointed with Jesus yesterday, this encounter changes all of that. Jesus still loves him. Jesus still calls him. And Peter runs to shore to meet Him.

Amid your disappointments and thoughts that Jesus has given up on you—discover that He hasn't. At just the right time He will meet and reassure you.

Amid your disappointments and thoughts that Jesus has given up on you—discover that He hasn't. At just the right time He will meet and reassure you. He has not changed, nor has His calling for your life to be focused on the spiritual needs and nurture of people changed.

MEET HIM FOR BREAKFAST

As Peter reaches the shore, he sees that Jesus has built a charcoal fire on which He is cooking fish for their breakfast (John 21:9). You have heard of the Last Supper—well, this is the last breakfast, and for Peter it may be equally important.

I can't help but wonder if Peter doesn't remember the last time he was around a charcoal fire. It was that terrible moment when he denied his Lord. Smells have a way of triggering memories: your mother's perfume, the burning of leaves in the fall. Does the smell of the burning charcoal remind Peter of his previous failure to be faithful to Christ? My guess is that Peter is reminded afresh with the smell of the fire that Jesus meets us in our failures in order to restore us to a loving pursuit of our calling.

The lesson in this breakfast is profound and necessary for all of us who are tempted to take life off calling and go back to a more comfortable, more predictable routine. As Peter and the others come to shore, Jesus is already cooking the fish for breakfast. Where did He get the fish? In this quiet miracle of the story lies a lesson that both Peter and we need to learn.

The lesson is simply this: God has the ability, the interest, and the love to provide for our needs, miraculously if necessary. And God is often pleased to provide in generous and abundant ways. Not only does Christ have fish already cooking on shore, but when the disciples count their catch, they notice that there are so many fish that the net should have broken. And they are large fish—153 of them, to be exact! Jesus has prepared a big enough breakfast so that seven hardworking, up-all-night fishermen have plenty to go around. As F. B. Meyer so wonderfully points out, with God it is always the fatted calf, the best robe, and the ring. With Him, our cup "runneth over!"

Jesus wants the disciples to know that He will gladly manage the supply in their lives, and that for them to leave the important work of the kingdom to create their own financial security is a serious mistake.