

“FEED MY LAMBS”

John 21:1–25

Key Verse: 21:15

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

Have you ever felt inadequate? Like you’ll never be good enough, never measure up? We try to overcome such feelings by over-compensating. We tell ourselves, “You’ve got this!” We pump ourselves up to think we can do it all, even something really great. On a rare occasion, with our abilities we might make it. But most of the time we fall short. For the few people who seem to never fail, they’re sure they’re better than everyone else. And that’s a problem, too. In this study, our first of four lessons on shepherding, we can learn how the Risen Jesus makes Simon Peter a shepherd of people. It shows us that anyone, from the over-confident to the totally broken, can become a shepherd. Why? It’s because of Jesus’ love for us. His love is the starting point, the foundation, of living as a shepherd for others. May God speak to each one of us through his word.

Look at verse 1. Jesus reveals himself again to his disciples. Later John says it’s the third time (14). The first time was on the very day he rose from the dead. Then, a week later he appeared, to help Thomas see and believe. Here he reveals himself again. But it’s not in Jerusalem; now the disciples are back in Galilee, by the Sea of Tiberias. In the other Gospels Jesus told them he would meet them in Galilee.¹ But so far in John, Jesus has revealed himself only in Jerusalem, and it was to clear up any doubt about him being risen. Now, by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee, his revealing himself has a different objective. Look at verse 2. If we do the counting, it’s seven men here, not eleven. Judas Iscariot is gone, and we don’t know where the other four are. But these seven are together. Simon Peter is mentioned first. Look at verse 3. Simon Peter tells them his plan, and they all naturally follow. They go out and get into the boat, but that night they catch nothing. At the beginning of his life with Jesus, Simon Peter had a similar experience (Luke 5:1–11). Now it seems to be happening again.

¹ Matt.26:32; 28:7,10; Mark 14:28; 16:7.

Look at verse 4. Just as day is breaking, Jesus is standing on the shore. According to verse 8, the disciples are about a hundred yards, a whole football field's length, away. In the early morning light, and at such a distance, they can't tell it's Jesus. Look at verse 5. "Jesus said to them, 'Children, do you have any fish?' They answered him, 'No.'" They can't even recognize his voice. After all-night fishing they're empty-handed and discouraged. Look at verse 6a. "He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.'" They don't know who it is who's telling them to do this. Maybe they think this man has just seen a school of fish in the shallow water coming their way. What do they do? Look at verse 6b. "So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish." What a surprise! Yet, this is so familiar.

What happens? Look at verse 7a. "That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" John is the first to recognize Jesus, and he's so happy to see him again. What does Peter do? Look at verse 7b. He puts on his outer garment, because he's been stripped for his fishing work, and throws himself into the sea. No doubt he's swimming vigorously to get to Jesus first, even before the boat. Peter, as usual, is impulsive, passionate, and wants to show Jesus how much he honors him, even by swimming fully clothed. The other disciples follow him in the boat, dragging the net full of fish (8). They must be tired and hungry. Look at verse 9. This hot breakfast has been prepared by none other than the Risen Jesus himself. He says to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught" (10). What happens? Look at verse 11. Peter doesn't bring just some of the fish, but all of them. He hauls the entire net ashore all by himself. And the untorn net is part of the miraculous work of Jesus.

Read verse 12a. Except for John, these men all fled when Jesus was arrested. But here Jesus comes to see them again. He shows up when they fail at fishing, helps them get this great catch, and he's even prepared breakfast for them! "Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord" (12b). In that silence, what does Jesus do? Look at verse 13. He's still their "bread of life" who provides for all their needs (6:35). He not only cooks but personally serves them. In this way Jesus "revealed himself" to his disciples (1,14). So, what is he revealing? It's his love. His love for them is faithful. As he loved them when he first called them, his love didn't change. His love takes the initiative. His love is humble. With kindness and affection he calls them "children," or "little ones." His love restores their failure. His love serves them a delicious

meal. After all he's been through, he loves them still. They failed, but he loves them to the end. In his love, anyone can have a relationship with him. In his love, anyone has hope. It all begins and ends with his love. It's his point with disciples: to reveal himself to them in his love. When we experience the love of Jesus, it becomes our new spiritual foundation. It's a great comfort to those who feel hopeless due to their weak human foundation. We all can be his disciples if we hold onto his love. And we all can make disciples if we learn to practice his love.

After serving the group, Jesus once again focuses on one person. Look at verse 15. It's Simon Peter. It seems Jesus has come especially for him. Just before Jesus was arrested, Simon Peter promised to lay down his life for him. But Jesus predicted he would deny him three times. As Jesus was arrested, Peter tried to cut off someone's ear. It was the wrong battle, the wrong direction. Then, while Jesus was on trial, people asked Peter if he was one of his disciples. And, he denied it three times. With his human zeal and love he failed. It humbled him and shattered his self-confidence. Now, though Peter has seen the Risen Jesus and heard him sending them into the world, he still carries the guilt that he denied him three times. So in love Jesus begins to help him solve this problem.

Read verse 15. Here, "Do you love me more than these?" means "more than the other disciples." Peter used to think he was better than the others. So Jesus gently reminds him of his failure, yet also restores him by helping him confess his love for him. Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." It's much more humble than "I will lay down my life for you." Now Peter is trusting in what Jesus knows. When he confesses he loves him, Jesus begins helping him have a love expressed in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18). He tells him, "Feed my lambs." It's a model for how we all should love him. Lambs, as newborn sheep, are vulnerable and can hardly stand on their own. They have an intense cuteness that can make other creatures want to care for them. Human beings, young and old, can be like lambs: cute, but weak and vulnerable. Jesus calls them "my" lambs; they belong to him. He means human beings generally, but especially those in a Christian community, including new believers. As lambs need careful protection and nutrition, humans need protection and feeding, both physically and spiritually. Jesus himself fed his disciples the words that the Father gave him (17:8). We, too, need to feed people not just food, but the sound doctrine of God's word. God's word is like pure spiritual milk that helps us grow up into salvation (1 Pet.1:23–2:2). If we love Jesus, we will feed his lambs.

Look at verse 16. Jesus omits the phrase “more than these” and switches the word “feed” to “tend.” To “tend” means “to shepherd,” which is all the other work besides feeding: guiding, leading and protecting. We can’t just leave people to figure it out on their own. Those who belong to Jesus need to be guided, led and protected. Those who’ve come to know his love can begin doing this work.

Look at verse 17. A third time Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” He’s using a word for “love” that says, “Are you even my *friend*?”² Now Peter is “grieved.” Obviously Jesus is referring to his three denials. But he’s not trying to insult him; he’s helping him see himself for who he really is. Peter has not really loved Jesus; he’s loved himself. When he should have followed him, he saved himself. During Jesus’ sufferings he was not a real friend. Jesus is also helping him see what real love for him is. Love for Jesus is not emotional or human love. In our sinfulness, none of us has the capacity to love Jesus; really we’re loving ourselves or the world. Real love for Jesus is born as we experience his love for us. John writes elsewhere, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). At this breakfast Peter has just experienced Jesus’ love. Now, with these probing questions, he tastes the godly grieving that leads to repentance (2 Cor.7:10a).

Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” Then he says, “Feed my lambs.” It’s what he’s already been teaching: if we love him, we will obey his commands.³ But love as obedience sounds like a duty, not authentic, right? So Jesus explained earlier, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept the Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (15:9–10). By keeping his command to feed his lambs, we abide in his love. In this context, “abide” means “receiving and giving” love. It’s how Jesus himself relates to the Father, and how he invites us to relate to him. In contrast, just trying to take love from Jesus is like abusing drugs. It’s a temporary “fix,” to feel better for a while. Jesus wants every believer to love him back. And he asks us to express our love for him practically by feeding his lambs. The reality is, nobody “feels like” doing this. If we’re waiting to feel like it, we’ll never do it. But as we act on his command and actually start feeding his lambs, we begin abiding in his love. As we keep doing this in loving obedience to Jesus, his love stays alive in us. We understand and appreciate his love more

² In verses 15–16 Jesus uses the word *agapeo*; here he switches to *phileo*, which means “friendly love.”

³ E.g. 14:15,21; 1 John 5:2.

deeply. We even gain the capacity to love as he loves. We start learning his love that's so faithful, that takes the initiative, his love that's so humble, so kind and affectionate, his love that's ready to restore others, his love so willing to serve. It's not mechanical; it's the only authentic love there is. Loving Jesus begins with knowing his great love for us, then obeying his command to feed his lambs. We all need to get started, with even one small, practical act of obedience to him.

Jesus' conversation with Peter highlights his goal in calling and investing in disciples. It was to help them become shepherds. Earlier he gave his parable of the good shepherd and his sheep. Only Jesus is the good shepherd, because only he laid down his life for the sheep (10:11). He's "the great shepherd of the sheep," "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (Heb.13:20; 1 Pet.2:25). But he wants Peter, and all disciples, to become shepherds, not hired hands. It's why he invited them to come learn from him. Feeding and shepherding people is not easy. We have so many weaknesses, mistakes and sins. We so easily go astray and get lost. Like sheep, we can't even remember the way! It can be exhausting. But in the great love of Jesus, feeding his lambs is not burdensome (1 John 5:3). In his love, Jesus has *hope*, for Peter and for us, to grow as shepherds like him.

Look at verses 18–19. Here Jesus predicts that Peter will indeed become a good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, as he himself did. Peter's not feeling too good about this. Look at verses 20–21. Peter sees John and asks Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" He doesn't want to suffer and die like Jesus all by himself. Read verse 22. Like Peter, we can't compare ourselves to others; we've got to listen to Jesus personally, "You follow me!"

So, do we feel like we've failed in Christian life? Or, are we over-confident? In Jesus, anyone can grow as a shepherd. Read verse 15 again. May God restore us in the great love of Jesus and help us love him back by obeying his words, "Feed my lambs."