

Reforming the Evangelical Pulpit, Part 1

John 21

Travis asked me to speak on the topic of reforming the evangelical pulpit. And so we're going to take a look at preaching and the preacher, more particularly here. The past 40 years have been hard on the evangelical pulpit. In no particular order, we've become accustomed to prosperity preachers and those who claim to have miraculous gifts of healing. We've had political preachers on the left and on the right. We've had cussing pastors and we've had sex-obsessed pastors. We have pastors that use humor and platform gimmicks and ah, expensive stage lighting in order to condition their audiences to receive what they have to say.

It is, it is common for seminaries to train men in preaching by telling them to use personal stories and personal illustrations in order to make their point and to connect with their audience. More recently, of course, the Southern Baptist Convention elevated a known and convicted plagiarist to be their

convention president. Now I think that is a far greater crisis, as much as attention as that has received, I think it's a far greater crisis than anything going in the world today. Because when you count the number of seminaries that are under the SBC umbrella and the fact that none of their presidents condemned Ed Litton for, for his plagiarism, the fact that their executive committee has refused to take any kind of action to remove him from his post. Instead, they have buttressed and defended him.

Well just think about what that means for the hundreds of men that are coming up in training under, in SBC seminaries. They, they have an academic code that would dismiss them for plagiarism. And yet, they have a president who is, who is a known plagiarist. And what kind of message does that send to those students? It tells them that is okay. It tells them that they do not need to do their own work for the pulpit. They can pay somebody or have, you know, they can hire out their messages and, and do whatever else they want to do and still be fit and qualified for, for ministry.

And the ripple effect of that is, is going to last for decades. And it, it is, it is a very serious crisis and if I

were a student in a Southern Baptist Seminary, I would be thinking very seriously about withdrawing and finding my training somewhere else. Because not only is the president like that, but there has been no loud voice of anyone in convention leadership or in seminary leadership who has called for his resignation. That means that they accept it. They acquiesce to it, if nothing else, by their silence.

And this is going to have an even more damaging effect long term on the, the evangelical pulpit because these were men we thought were our friends and thought were likeminded. And the dilution that will take place is, is something that's going to take many, many decades to recover from if this goes the course that it seems to have taken.

So this is what's happened over the last 40 years in the evangelical pulpit. It's a very serious problem. And the question is that that we want to just address here is how do we go about reclaiming that? How, how can we reform that? And the truth of the matter is, is that you and I, we can't reform that. We can't impose reformation on unwilling men. But we can understand what it is supposed to be like. And we can aim our

own hearts, our own pulpits, our own congregations, our own pastors, we can aim after the right and biblical model.

What we need and, and what we must aim for is quite simple, actually. It is not difficult in terms of what the Bible has to say about things. But in order to set the stage, let's think about it this way. To step back and ask the question, is, is it really that bad? Is it as bad as I've framed things here.

Well, you know, we need to step back and soberly consider our environment in light of what Scripture says. And what Scripture says and what Scripture does is it warns us repeatedly about the danger of false prophets and of false teachers. There is no excuse whatsoever for a Bible-believing Christian to read Scripture and not realize that we are living in a dangerous environment. And to assess it properly and to assess it soberly. Jesus said in Matthew chapter 7 verse 15, "Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

And the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter chapter 2 verse 1 said, "False prophets also arose among the people just as there will also be false teachers among you." And the Apostle John in his first letter chapter 4 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

You know, we're not talking about genuine evangelicals here. We're talking about a situation where people wearing the sheep's wool of evangelical garb have entered in, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. And it explains so much to view the situation from that perspective, rather than simply thinking that these are all just wandering brethren who just need a little tap on the shoulder to get them going a different direction.

No, most of them need to be born again. They act this way. They teach this way. They minister this way because they are unregenerate. That is the problem. And so we just want to take this seriously and in light of things that Scripture says, in light of what we've seen, it just seems to me like it's time to recognize that these are not even brethren that we are talking

about. And the question becomes then not what they should do, but what we should do as a believing remnant under the broader evangelical umbrella.

Well what I would do is encourage us here today and recommit myself for whatever the remaining years that the Lord has given me. You know, I've got 60 years in the rearview mirror, and you know, do the math. There's a lot less in the windshield than there is behind me. And so I'm preaching to myself as much as anything here, as I share these things with you. And I would invite you to turn to the Gospel of John chapter 21. The Gospel of John chapter of 21.

As we look at that occasion in which the Lord Jesus Christ restored Peter to ministry after his resurrection. You remember the story very well. We don't need to even look at it in the text. On the night that Christ was crucified, Peter denied him three times. And now, after his resurrection, Jesus is going to restore Peter with a threefold confession and send Peter out into ministry. And giving Peter explicit directions on what it is he is to do in ministry. As we're going to see as we look at

other Scriptures alongside this passage, we're going to see that this is the same kind of commission that belongs to us today.

What Jesus said to Peter is what he says to men holding an evangelical pulpit today. This is what we are to do. And it's all set forth in a spirit of grace and forgiveness that the Lord extends to Peter after Peter failed him so badly, so, so recently when this text takes place. Let's read these three verses, verses 15 and 17 together. The scriptures say this, "So 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, 'Tend my lambs.'

"He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Shepherd my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'" Now let me just

make a preliminary comment about the manner in which I'm approaching this text.

Many of you will be familiar with the view that explains this text based on a distinction between two Greek words for love, when which Jesus addresses his questions to Peter. The Greek verbs for love, *agapao*, and a close synonym, *phileo*. And the passage is, is explained by the fact that Jesus asks Peter the first two times, "Do you *agapao* me?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, I *phileo* you." The idea being that *agapao* is a type of total commitment whereas *phileo* is a idea of more personal affection kind of thing. And so it's explained on the basis of that distinction.

And then on the third time, Jesus uses *phileo* to ask Peter whether he loves him or not. And Peter is supposedly grieved because Jesus asked him whether he even had affection for him rather than total commitment. Well, for many reasons that I won't explain today, I am not going to explain the passage from that perspective. I just want to acknowledge the issue so that those of you who have heard that understand that I am approaching the passage from a different perspective, and you're



not left wondering why I didn't give you the right interpretation to begin with.

Well, there's a reason for that. There's a different, and I believe better way to understand the passage. But that difference with teachers that I respect is secondary to today's topic and it would unnecessarily complicate our time together if I went into a long extended discussion of that particular issue. We're going to look at this passage from the perspective that Jesus is asking Peter the same question three times.

Part of the reason that we're, that we take that position is because it's what the text says. Jesus asked him the first time, verse 16; he asked him the second time, verse 17; he asked him the third time, "Simon, do you love me?" If the third question was intended to be greatly different from the first two, you couldn't say he was asking it a third time. It would be the first time that he was asking that question.

And so there's a lot of reasons to look at the passage from a different perspective. So, I'm aware of that issue, but that

is not our topic for today. For today, what we're looking at here is this. We remember the historical context. Peter had denied Jesus three times and he had denied him publicly and he denied him with oaths. So it was a very serious betrayal that Peter had done. There was a very serious straying that had taken place. Just as the evangelical pulpit today has strayed and denied Christ in similar ways, just with a little bit more sophistication than the fisherman did.

Jesus comes to Peter in order to restore him, to restore him publicly, to restore him in front of the other disciples. And so he walks him through a threefold affirmation of this love. And then instructs Peter on what he is to do in response to that love. Peter now is confessing Christ, not denying him. And the threefold confession Jesus uses as a basis to set him on the path for future ministry. And that is the same path that we are to follow ourselves.

If there were ever to be an evangelical repentance for the current state of the evangelical pulpit, the fruit of repentance would look like this. The fruit of repentance would be men embracing the four principles that we're going to talk about

today and repenting and forsaking all of the things that have marked the drift that has taken place over the past 40 or 50 years.

And so what does Christ require from men in the pulpit? What does Christ require from those who would name his name, who would open his Word, who would teach, who would lead a congregation? What would he require from them? We're going to see four principles here in this text. And the first one is this is that he must be a man of Christ.

The three questions that Jesus asks Peter allows him to repent of his prior denials. And notice, notice the way that it is phrased, the words of Christ to Peter. He says in verse 15, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Verse 16, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Verse 17, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He is clarifying and drawing out of Peter's heart, Peter what is the supreme object of your affection? What is your response to me, the risen Lord?

And so Christ puts himself at the center of the issue and calls for Peter to acknowledge love and commitment to Christ before he's able to be sent out into ministry. And that principle of love for Christ exclusively is the mark of the commitment of any true disciple of Jesus Christ. And it is to be an exclusive devotion where there is no competitors for our innermost affections to compete with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look back at Matthew chapter 10 with me. In words that do not need to be watered down. Matthew chapter 10 verse 37. This is simply what Christ requires of a true disciple. If you don't love Christ a, at the utmost, you don't belong to him. And so in Matthew chapter 10 verse 37, Jesus says, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me."

To be a disciple of Christ is to love him preeminently above all else and to have that clear as a principle in your mind even if you stumble and don't live in perfect accordance with the principle. You recognize the principle in your heart. You embrace it. And that is the mark of a true Christian. And

therefore, all the more is it to be the mark of a man stepping into an evangelical pulpit. He understands who Christ is and he loves him supremely. He loves him to the point of sacrificing himself. He loves him to the point of obeying Christ no matter what the cost may be.

Jesus made this clear in the Gospel of John, earlier in the Gospel that we're taking our text from. In John 14:15, he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Verse 21 of chapter 14, "He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me." John 15 verse 14. "You are my friends if you do what I command you." And so there's this clarifying, penetrating question that comes to Peter. Peter, where is the supreme affection of your heart? What do you think about me? Do you love me like this?

And Peter says, "Yes, Lord, I do." "Yes, Lord, I do." "Yes, Lord, I do." He says it three times. And so the preeminent qualification for a man to carry an evangelical pulpit is that he be a genuine true Christian. I mean it, it is a sad reflection of the state of things that that point even needs to

be made, but Jesus makes it with Peter. And we see Jesus putting himself as the central issue that Peter needs to consider.

And so a man in the pulpit, a man with an ongoing teaching ministry must be a man of Christ, a man that is personally devoted to him, not simply theological accuracy, not simply engaging personal relationships in the course of pastoral ministry. Those things are important. They have a place. But the preeminent cornerstone is a man who loves Christ enough to obey him, enough to love Christ in order to put the interests of Christ ahead of his own self-interest. To risk and surrender the possibility of even his own freedom and his own popularity, to be willing to risk all of that for the greater sake of Christ. That is the first thing that we see out of this passage.

The solitary motive. The preeminent motive for being in a pulpit must be a personal love for Christ that excludes all others. There must be a sharp clear recognition of the lordship of Christ that his Word belongs to him. Therefore, a pulpit belongs to him and that we're just servants delivering something to his people. That we are nothing in ourselves. There is

nothing in ourselves of any merit. There is this pure and utter and exclusive devotion to Christ.

And so for a modern reformation to take place, for those of us who separate ourselves from the current evangelical sewage that is flowing through so much, for those of us that separate from it, we must recognize these things. And if there's to be repentance from others, they must repent of their desire for fame. They must repent of their desire for fortune. They must repent of their desire for a following and counting their Twitter followers and things of this nature.

And repent of their desire for applause from unsaved men in the secular arena. They must repent of all of that. They must repent of all of those false motives and come back to Christ and humbly, with Peter, confess their failures and say, Lord, yes, I do love you. I know that my prior life has not shown it. I understand that my prior ministry has reflected me not you. But, Lord, I repent of that.

Perhaps, just perhaps reformation would come if these pastors would seriously step back and ask themselves why they even have a platform. What is the purpose of it? Do they fear God or not? Do they fear the fact that they will face a stricter judgment at the end of their ministry? That they will stand before Christ and bear a stricter judgment, James 3:1.

Do they fear God or not? Because it's hard to reconcile the humor and the sex obsession and the cursing and all of the other things that I mentioned earlier. It's not just hard, it's impossible to recognize that manner of ministry with a man who genuinely fears God, who genuinely loves Christ supremely. A man who genuinely loves Christ will be marked by his sobriety and a seriousness to his ministry that is fitting with the high calling that's been given to him. And the platform that has been given to him.

If that is missing, if you don't somehow detect something of the fear of God and the love of Christ in a man, there is reason to just get up and leave. Walk out. Don't even wait for the sermon to finish and certainly, don't stay in a church that is like that. What Peter did in response to these questions was



he looked back at his denials, and he rectified them. The Lord gave him opportunity to rectify them by confessing three times that he did in fact love Christ. And did it publicly in a way that others could see and embrace.

And so that moment clarified his motive for future service. And the grief that Peter expressed is not over a difference in a verb form that is used. But rather grief over the recognition that the third time just brought his mind freshly back to that third time that he denied this risen Lord with curses and of course his heart was broken. It pained him to remember what he had so recently done. But the Lord in his grace, the Lord in his mercy brings Peter back into ministry and restores him.

You know what? The Lord would do the same for some of these recalcitrant pastors now if they would come in the like-minded and like-humility of Peter and repent of it all. The Lord is gracious and forgiving. But this current path that we're on is obviously contrary to being a man of Christ. And it is endemic in Christian ministry today with far too few exceptions.