

Why True Brokenness Precedes True Spiritual Healing

A minister once told me he objected to counseling because Jesus never did it. Certainly that is correct in the sense that Jesus did not keep office hours or meet with scheduled clients in his office. On the other hand, neither did He attend board meetings, and I assure you that pastor went to plenty of those. Jesus' "counseling sessions" were spontaneous and contextual, but they quite frequently bore the earmarks of biblical counseling.

Jesus did grief counseling with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In John 3, He met in the dark of the night with a client named Nicodemus, who was struggling with a religious spirit, was filled with biblical confusion and had deep insecurities about eternal life. In John 4, Jesus did counseling with a guilt-ridden woman with a sordid past and a heart riddled by racial hurt.

But perhaps our most powerful insight into Christ as the Wonderful Counselor comes in John 21: Jesus' lakeside encounter with a hurting man named Simon Peter, a commercial fisherman.

The Fisherman

His wounded emotions raw from a recent and very public failure, Peter is like almost every counseling client I've ever encountered. He deeply wants and desperately needs soul restoration, but he fears the very meeting where that is most likely to happen.

The hope so recently drained out of him, drained as utterly as death, was just beginning to struggle back to life. But despair and guilt—most of all guilt—lay upon that hope like a massive stone. Peter's remorse was unrelenting. He could bear

it no longer. He was not a mystical or contemplative man. He was a man of action. Real things, real work, real sweat—that's what he needed now, and he knew exactly where to find it.

"I am going fishing."

Peter had always enjoyed a long night's fishing. The cool breeze, men's jokes and laughter, the jovial unity of men in a boat. Then the morning sun, the new heat on his shoulders, the dawn dancing on the water's surface. He was in a boat doing what he knew and loved. This night was a disappointment, however, as was the fishing. It seemed to him a picture of what had become of his life. The boisterous brotherhood he had hoped for had been spoiled by his sour thoughts. He felt disconnected from the others, and he thought perhaps their own silence was unspoken condemnation. Every man in the boat knew what Peter had done, and the shameful knowledge lay heavy upon the little boat in thick and uncomfortable silence.

The fact that they worked all night in utter futility only added to his heaviness. Time after time they drew in the empty nets. Was fishing also ruined for him? More precisely, had he ruined it? Empty-handed and humiliated, Peter finished mechanically, joylessly, knowing these nets would be empty even before they were brought up.

As the morning sun gained power, he shucked off his coat to bake his aching muscles. They all looked at Peter and stretched as if to say, "That's it. Haul them in, and let's go home." They bent to the final task without a word. They had all done this before, a thousand times, though seldom with such utter failure, such heaviness.

"Have you caught anything?"

The shouted question came from a stranger on the shore. It was the kind of good-natured question all fishermen have asked each other through the ages, but this morning, it stung more than it should have.

"No," someone in the back yelled as they piled their nets in the bottom of the boat and started to set the oars. "No luck tonight."

"Cast on the right side. There. Yes, right there. You'll catch them there."

The morning sun was behind the man, and the brilliant glare off the water was blinding. Shielding their eyes, the fishermen peered across the lake at the stranger but could not make him out. Then, oddly, without even discussing it, they did exactly as he said. As they had done countless times in their lives and as they had done all that night with nothing to show for it, they cast a net. After watching its weighted perimeter spread the net in a wide circle, then splash softly and sink, they waited for it to settle before drawing the draglines. As soon as they did, they knew it was full. Their experienced muscles told them this single cast was a long night's harvest. Expressions of surprise and shared laughter began to fill the boat even before the bulging nets surfaced. Their spirits lifted. This was more like it.

In the midst of all this, John let go of his hold and stood upright in the boat. Shielding his eyes, he peered again at the man on the shore. John's lips moved, but at first, he said nothing aloud. Then, not as much to them as to himself, he whispered.

"It's the Lord."

This statement hit the big man like a fist to his jaw.

"I tell you, it's Him, Peter," John said. "That's the Lord over there."

The others paused, holding the nets, waiting to see for themselves but loathing to lose their marvelous catch. Like John, Peter simply loosed his hold and stood. Seizing his cloak, he shrugged it on over his head and plunged into the

lake.

Soon he dragged himself up onto the black stones of the shoreline. His bare feet struggled to find balance on the rocks, and his clothes hung as heavy and sodden as his soul.

Oh, how he dreaded this. And yet somehow he longed for it, ached for it. That's why he left the others in the boat and swam ashore in the chilly dawn. If this man was Jesus, and now Peter was certain He was, the coming rebuke would be as crushing as it was deserved. Perhaps even final. Maybe Peter would be banished, sent away in disgrace.

Well, let it happen in private. If Jesus intended to give him a tongue-lashing or cast him away, Peter wanted to hear it alone. On the other hand, there was always the chance for grace. Peter had seen Jesus forgive and heal some of the nastiest people in the world. Perhaps—but there was no use speculating. Jesus was there in front of him, sitting by a fire. Shivering now, Peter crept closer. A smile played across Jesus' face. Peter instinctively stretched his hands toward the charcoal fire and lifted his face to meet the gaze of Jesus.

A memory instantly vaulted into his mind. Peter saw himself standing in Caiaphas' courtyard, shivering on that fearful night just as he did now. He heard his own voice: "I never heard of this Jesus. Never heard of him, I tell you." The door of Caiaphas' house opened, and the guards led Jesus out in bonds. Peter's eyes met the eyes of Jesus across the fire. Some rooster somewhere announced the approach of dawn. Startled, Peter jumped at the sound, uncertain if it was real or the tortured voice of his memories.

Their eyes met. Neither man spoke.

The horrible memory hung in the air between them.

Then Jesus spread His hands as if to indicate the fish

grilling over the coals and the bread baking on the hot flat stones at the fire's edges. Peter glanced at the food being cooked, then back at Jesus. What did it mean?

At last, Jesus broke the silence with a smile: "Come and dine."

Come and Dine

There are only two places in the New Testament in which a reference is made to a "charcoal fire." One is in Caiaphas' courtyard, in the story of Peter's betrayal; the other now, in this story, as Jesus gazes at his betrayer.

Yet it was not to hurt Peter's heart that Jesus met him by a charcoal fire. It was to heal and restore Peter. There is no biblical record of a stern rebuke. No tongue-lashing. No demand that Peter make some humiliating public confession of the kind so beloved by the modern church. Just breakfast.

In a certain survey I heard about, Americans were asked what they most longed to hear someone say to them. Of all the answers given, three were the most common. The first was entirely predictable: "I love you." Americans, no less I suppose than anyone else in the world, want to know they are loved and relish hearing it said to them. The second most common answer surprised me: "I forgive you." We are guilty, and we know we are. Our ache for absolution makes this simple phrase our hearts' cry. Forgiveness, human and divine, is a deep need, but I was surprised that it was expressed so commonly. The third answer really gave me a laugh: "Supper's ready." That was a surprise to me. The third answer seems so frivolous compared with our felt need for love and forgiveness.

Then it hit me. That is the whole gospel. That is what Jesus was saying to Peter on the shore of the lake of Tiberius. That is in fact the threefold announcement at every Communion service. Every time the church is invited to the Lord's table,

every time the elements are offered, the message from God is always the same:

“I love you. I forgive you. Supper’s ready.”

Preemptive grace disallowed Peter’s confession, made unnecessary any penitence before full immediate restoration. If our every sin is a denial of Christ, then Peter was every one of us at our worst.

Peter denied Christ three times. Each time, Peter probably repented and determined within himself to do better: *I wasn’t prepared. Just let them ask me again. This time I won’t fail.*

But fail he did, again and again.

Peter had known ministry and worked miracles. He had cast out demons and healed the sick. Beyond all that, he had walked with Jesus, seen the Transfiguration and heard the audible voice of God. And yet he fell. He failed the greatest test of his life to that point, and all his colleagues knew it. A fallen minister, shivering, guilty and longing for help. Where was he that morning?

He was at the very doorway of wholeness. That doorway is called brokenness. Peter was broken. But now he could be whole. At that moment of renewed fellowship, Peter’s guilt-ridden and shame-filled soul was healed. He was also, of course, reaffirmed in ministry and leadership, but first, and most importantly, Peter was healed.

3 Steps for Inner Healing

Three important characteristics of that lakeside encounter clearly make it a lovely example of the process of inner healing. First, Jesus took Peter back to the painful point of his personal failure. At the moment Peter stretched his hands out across that charcoal fire, and his eyes met the eyes of Jesus, his pathetic denial confronted him like a slap in the

face.

No one wants to see his own failures for what they are. No one wants to revisit the scene of some violent and traumatic incident. Absolutely no one wants to be taken there again, forced to see it, even reenter it, and feel its pain all over again. Yet in order for Peter to receive the dawn of a new day of healing and renewal, Jesus re-created the midnight scene of Peter's dark denial.

Not only did Jesus take Peter back there, He met Peter there—went into the scene with Peter and comforted him there. Wonderful counsel disallows denial. The wounded cannot be made whole without facing the wound, the “awful moment,” whatever it is. But just seeing it is not enough, and could in fact be devastating. They must encounter Jesus there, right in the midst of the awful moment.

When Peter saw that charcoal fire, his eyes met Jesus' eyes. Jesus was there in the awful moment, and in His eyes, Peter saw love and healing grace. This grace is at the very heart of soul restoration. It was not to humiliate Peter that the betrayal was re-created in such detail. It was to say to Peter, “I was there. I still loved you there. Now I'm here, and I still love you.”

Jesus did not stop there. He took Peter deeper into the bitter scene. Notice the re-created repetition. Peter denied Jesus three times, and three times Jesus asked the question, “Do you love Me?”

What was Jesus after? Peter's humiliation? Certainly not. Three times, Peter had publicly denied even knowing Jesus. That is why Jesus asked him three times. It was not to hurt Peter but to remind him that despite a momentary failure, Peter truly loved the Lord. Jesus knew Peter loved Him, but He needed to remind Peter.

Next, having restored the relationship, Jesus restored Peter's

calling to ministry and leadership. Here then is the pattern of soul restoration. Jesus' pattern is remarkably different from many in ecclesiastical circles. They seem to relish exposure, humiliation and public rejection for private sin. In the face of very public sin, Jesus chose private healing, private restoration and a renewed call to ministry.

Here is Jesus' pattern: When sin and denial lead to guilt and separation, prevenient grace forces us to revisit what we have done and recognize it for what it was. For healing from inflicted trauma, He does the same. He takes us back there, back into it all to see it for what it really was. Then Jesus enters that scene and reassures us of His love. Then He reminds us of our love for Him. Finally, He reassures us that we are not disqualified. Soul restoration cannot be complete without the restoration of fellowship.

Finally, one more step had to be completed. Peter had to be brought back into full relationship. Broken fellowship had to be restored. That could only happen in divine Communion, in the breaking of bread. It was to a meal that Jesus summoned Peter and the others, as He had done at just such crucial moments throughout their few brief years together.

There is no way to understand that moment on the lakeshore apart from brokenness. Brokenness changed Peter not for the worse but for a new kind of ministry and for eternity. Peter's total brokenness was necessary for him to realize his need for total healing, but Peter could not heal himself. Peter could not restore himself to relationship with Christ or to his destiny in the church. Only Jesus could do that, and He did it as He does even now, at the table of grace.

The New Testament writings of Peter reveal in a spectacular way the amazing transformation wrought in his life. They also tell us that we too can be transformed through brokenness.

Open your Bible and read 1 Peter 2:5-10. Read those words, and

meditate not so much on their content but on the sensitive, intelligent beauty of expression. Then read 2 Peter 1:19 and 1 Peter 1:4. Even if one doubted the truth of the words, the words are undeniably perfect. They are surely the work of a seasoned literary genius.

Not so. They are among the few preserved writings of a blue-collar, working-class man of whose education we know nothing beyond what we may assume based on his Jewish culture. "He was ignorant and unlearned," we are told.

From a dark night of devastating personal moral failure to a place of primal apostolic leadership and truly insightful eloquence, a new and powerful voice arose from the ashes of shame. But how? What happened?

Pentecost, certainly. The experience of the upper room was the empowering moment. The cowardice of Caiaphas' house gone, Peter roared like the Lion of Judah in his Pentecostal message of Acts 2. But what got him to the upper room? Why was he even allowed to be there at all? Judas Iscariot was not there. His unavailing remorse found suicidal expression. Peter was also remorseful. What was the difference? There was very little difference in what they had done. Judas denied Jesus for money. Peter denied Him out of cowardice. Judas denied Jesus once. Peter denied Him three times after being told that he would. Both were sorry. Judas tried to give the money back. Peter wept. Both sinned; both failed; both were remorseful. One hanged himself, and the other became a saint.

The standard and correct answer, of course, is Peter's Pentecostal experience. But there is more, and we often miss it. What happened to Peter between Caiaphas' house and the upper room that did not happen to Judas? A fishing trip and a single word: brokenness.

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