

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES

John 21:1-19

Do you know anybody like my friend Wayne?

Wayne and I were classmates, buddies, and basketball teammates in junior high and high school back in western Pennsylvania. Wayne was not a big guy. He was two or three inches shorter than me. But he was quick, athletic, a good ball-handler, and an excellent player on defense. He was one of the best all-around players we had.

But one day, just before the beginning of the season our senior year, Wayne blew it. He lost his cool in practice one day. He got mad at Coach Robinson for some reason, and he quit. He said something to the coach he shouldn't have said. Then he just walked out. And he made it clear he wasn't coming back.

If you have ever said something in the heat of the moment that you wish you could take back, or done something you wish you could undo, maybe you know how Wayne felt. As time went on, Wayne really missed being part of the team. He knew no one else was responsible for the situation but himself. He knew he was the one at fault. But he desperately wanted another chance.

Since I was one of the team captains, Wayne asked me if I would go and talk to Coach Robinson on his behalf. I'll tell you the truth: I had some mixed feelings about doing that. I felt bad for him. I really did. And I knew we would be a better team *with* him than we were *without* him. But I also knew that if Wayne came back, I was going to spend more time on the bench, because he and I usually played the same position.

But I went to Coach Robinson, and this was his response. He said: "Neil, I'll leave it up to the team. If the guys want Wayne back, I'll let him come back. There is only one condition: The vote has to be unanimous."

He was willing to give Wayne a second chance. But he was not about to allow any dissension or division on the team. So, we voted. I don't know what the vote was. Only Coach knew. What I do know is that it wasn't unanimous. At least one guy, maybe more, voted no. To this day, it makes me sad that we didn't and wouldn't give Wayne a second chance.

Maybe that is not such a big deal in the larger scheme of life, but it was a big deal for Wayne. All he wanted was a second chance. An opportunity to make up for his mistake.

I'm pretty sure I know how Jesus would have voted, if he had been on our basketball team.

Have you ever had an experience like Wayne's?

Ever blown it and found a door closed in your face as a result?

Do you have some painful memory of failure – it could be moral or spiritual, academic or athletic, professional or social – that you desperately wish you could erase from the record of your life?

Has something happened along the way that has left you with the feeling that you are somehow unfit, or unworthy of respect and trust?

Do you need a second chance in your life?

The truth, of course, is that everyone needs a second chance. And a third. And a fourth. And on and on. Because we all blow it, each of us in our own way. We all sin and fall short of the measure of God's glory. Not a day goes by that you and I don't need another chance. That is an indisputable fact of life.

But I've got some good news for you. The good news is that, in spite of the ways we blow it, in spite of the ways we make a mess of things, in spite of our failures, God loves us anyway. Other people may give up on us, and we may give up on ourselves, but Jesus does not give up on us. Jesus will not give up on you. He is always there, ready to give us another chance.

You can see this in the life of Peter. We have already seen that he was a man of colossal contradictions. He could be remarkably strong. And he could be disturbingly weak. At times he seemed to have the most profound insights. At other times he was a complete blockhead.

He received high praise from Jesus, and a stinging rebuke as well. At Caesarea Philippi, he was the great confessor. He recognized Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said: "Way to go, Peter! You got it!" (That is a paraphrase of what Jesus actually said.) But at Jerusalem, he became the great denier. When the chips were down, Peter was a miserable failure. Three times he denied his relationship to the Lord Jesus. No doubt he was haunted by the memory of his failure. Even the resurrection of the Lord Jesus did not erase it from his memory.

There is a book by Christian psychologist and counselor Norman Wright called *Making Peace with Your Past*. A lot of people need to make peace with their past. Maybe some of you do. Peter needed to make peace with *his* past. He needed to deal with his denials of Jesus in the hour of testing if he was to find peace and move forward in his life as a follower of Jesus.

Look at what was happening in John 21. After His resurrection, Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), to the disciples behind locked doors (20:19-23), and then to the disciples again a week later, this time with "doubting Thomas" present (20:24-29). But the disciples were still in a kind of limbo. They weren't sure what it all meant. They weren't sure what to do. So, Peter decided to do what he knew best. He decided to go fishing. And several of the disciples went with him. For Peter, I think, fishing was a form of therapy in this case. I don't think it was an attempt to escape from his past, or to forget about

his failure. I think it was something he needed to do to work through his guilt and make peace with his past.

But Peter couldn't make peace with his past all by himself. Neither can you and I. Peter needed Jesus to make peace with his past. He needed a second chance, and only Jesus could give it to him.

The disciples were out fishing all night – which is not unusual. Much of the fishing done in the Sea of Galilee in those days was done at night. It still is. The fishermen used nets to catch the fish. But on this night, they caught nothing. Not a single fish. The night was a total failure. Until Jesus called to them from the shore and told them to throw the net on the right side of the boat.

What do you think: Could Jesus see schools of fish on the right side of the boat from where He stood on the beach that the guys in the boat couldn't see? I don't think that's it. I think Jesus sovereignly summoned the fish to be there as a sign of His presence and power.

John figured it out first. He said: "It's the Lord!" (21:7). But Peter was the first to act. First he threw on some clothes. And then he jumped into the water and swam ashore to greet Jesus.

It was no accident that Jesus happened to be there, waiting on the shore for the disciples. It was no accident that He was there, making breakfast for them. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, and the perfect, all-sufficient Savior of sinners, did not think it beneath His dignity to fix breakfast for His disciples. They weren't looking for Him. He was looking for them. There was still more of Himself that He wanted to give to them.

And, obviously, Jesus and Peter had some unfinished business to take care of. After breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside. You know Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus asks Peter three times to reaffirm his love for Jesus. It is not a question about Peter's failures in the past. It is not a question about yesterday. It is a question about today, about the present, about right here and right now. Three times, with laser-like focus, Jesus says to Peter: "Do you love me?"

Not Peter's failures in the past, but his decision in the present. That is what Jesus is concerned about. Jesus has already taken care of the past. He has taken care of Peter's past. He has taken care of your past and mine. What He asks of Peter and of us is to let go of the past and trust Him.

Have you done that? Have you let go of the failures in your past? Have you given them to Jesus? If you've never done that, will you do it today? Jesus can set you free from the guilt and shame of whatever you've done. If He could do it for Peter, He can do it for you and me.

You've got to hear this: There is room in the kingdom of God for failures. In the fellowship of Christ's followers, there is room for people who have blown it along the way. People like

Peter. And you and me. The grace and mercy of God really are new every morning. The God of second chances is always there, waiting for us to come back to Him.

You probably know that there is more than one word for “love” in Greek, which is the language of the New Testament. You may know that in verse 15, when Jesus said to Peter: “Do you love me more than these?”, and again in verse 16, when He asked Peter: “Do you truly love me?”, the word Jesus used for “love” is the word *agape*, which refers to a self-giving, self-sacrificing love which seeks what is best for the beloved. It is the kind of love Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 13. It is the kind of love that prompted God to send His Son into the world to die for us (John 3:16). It is the kind of love Jesus demonstrated when He went to the cross and gave up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). It is the kind of love to which Jesus called us when He gave His disciples the new commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

There was a time, before his denials of Jesus, when Peter would have answered Jesus without any hesitation or reservation. There was a time when he would have said to Jesus: “Absolutely! You bet I do. Nobody loves you more than I do. And you can count on my love and loyalty for as long as I live, even if I have to die for you.”

But that was then, and this was now. Peter had been sobered by his failure. He had been chastened and humbled. He had come to see just how weak he really was. So, in reply to Jesus’ questions, he affirmed his love for Jesus. But all of his previous bluster and boasting were gone. Finally, the balloon of Peter’s spiritual arrogance had been popped. He did not even presume to use the same word for “love” that Jesus used. Instead of *agape*, Peter used the word *phileo*, which means “affection” or “the love of a friend.” He said to Jesus: “You know that I love (*phileo*) you” (21:15, 16).

Then, when Jesus asked him to reaffirm his love a third time, Jesus Himself used the word *phileo* (21:17). Some Bible scholars make a big deal of the different words for “love” used by Jesus and Peter. And it is not an insignificant thing. It *is* significant that Peter has been so humbled by his failure that he finally recognizes the smallness of his love for Jesus. But the important thing here is not just the distinction in the words for “love,” but the fact that Peter reaffirms his love for Jesus, and is restored and recommissioned to ministry.

The commission he receives is a pastoral one. He is to do the work of a shepherd. He is to feed both the lambs (the little ones) and the full-grown sheep with the rich spiritual food of the Word of God. He is to shepherd the flock of God’s people, to take care of the sheep, to guide them and guard them and watch over them. Peter would never forget this commission. In fact, later in his life, he would pass it on to the elders of the churches to whom he wrote in 1 Peter 5. He wrote: “To the elders (*presbyters*) among you, I appeal as a fellow elder (*presbyter*), a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who will also share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” (5:1-2a).

In spite of his momentous failure in the hour of testing, Peter was given a second chance, a new and renewed mission from the God of second chances. You see, not only is there room for failures in the kingdom of God. There is also a job for failures, a mission for failures, in

the work of God's kingdom. When He gave Peter his new commission, Jesus did not focus on yesterday. It wasn't about the past. Jesus had already taken care of the past for Peter in His death on the cross. It was not about what happened in the past. It was about the present and the future. It was about today and where we go from here.

Peter, you know, was not the only person in the Bible who was given a second chance. There is a murderer named Moses whom God used to deliver His people from their slavery in Egypt. There is a persecutor named Paul who was transformed by God's grace into the greatest missionary in the history of the church.

There is a prostitute named Rehab who, because of her faith, became an ancestor of the Lord Jesus. There is a lying, cheating tax-collector named Zaccheus, whose life was transformed when he met Jesus.

And what about the Samaritan woman at the well, with her long history of failed relationships? Or the prodigal son in Jesus' parable who finally came to his senses after wasting his inheritance and indulging himself in all kinds of pagan pleasures, and finally went back home to be welcomed by the loving embrace of a father who had never stopped praying for him.

In the parable, Jesus gives us a picture of what God is like. Like the prodigal's father, He is the God of second chances.

None of us deserves a second chance. My friend Wayne didn't deserve another chance. We don't have a right to a second chance. Or a third. It is a gift of grace.

A businessman had a picture of his wife and himself in his office. After commenting about how nice it was, a visitor noticed that the businessman had tears in his eyes. So he asked: "Why are you crying?"

The man said: "There was a time in our marriage when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt, she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing I did not deserve for her to answer in the affirmative, I asked her to forgive me. And she forgave me.

"This picture was taken shortly after that. When I look at this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me in this picture. You look at it and say: 'Nice picture.' But when I look at it, I see my life given back to me again."

That is an act of grace. Amazing grace. And grace is God's specialty. Please don't leave today thinking that sin – whatever your sin may be – is not a big deal. It is! Please don't leave today thinking that God doesn't take sin seriously. He does! Very seriously. It is nothing to play around with. But the Bible tells us again and again that the Lord is compassionate and gracious. He is slow to get angry and abounding in love. He is ready and

willing to forgive anyone who comes to Him with a heart of repentance, no matter what we have done or how we have failed. He is the God of second chances.

We will come back another time to look at what Jesus says in verses 18 and 19 about the manner of Peter's death. For now, notice the final two words in verse 19: "Follow me." Jesus was saying: "Whatever happens in your life, Peter, in both good times and hard times, follow me."

Which is what Jesus says to us, too. A second chance from God is not a ticket that entitles us to live for ourselves or to do whatever we please. Jesus calls each of us to follow Him. To love Him. To serve Him. To incarnate His love and grace. To give those in our lives who need it a second chance.

My teammates and I missed the opportunity to give my friend Wayne a second chance. But Jesus is ready (and He is able, more than able) to give a second chance to anyone who comes to Him with a heart of humility and trust.

Though Peter failed Him miserably, Jesus gave Peter a second chance. He is the God of second chances.

Do you need a second chance, a fresh start, in your life today? Open your heart to the Savior who specializes in giving second chances, and experience His amazing grace.

May it be so in us, to the glory of His name. Amen.