

Homiletics Analysis: John 21

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — This Text as Epilogue to the Gospel of John: John 21 functions as a deliberate epilogue to the Gospel of John, standing in relation to the whole of chapters 1–20 as a closing movement that ties together three threads left unresolved by the resurrection appearances of chapter 20: the vocational future of the disciples, the restoration of Peter, and the destiny of the Beloved Disciple. John 20:30–31 has already stated the Gospel’s evangelistic purpose, yet chapter 21 follows — suggesting that the Spirit-guided author understood these three threads as essential to the Gospel’s complete claim. The chapter does not introduce new theology; it applies and personalizes the theology of the whole Gospel in concrete, relational terms.

This Text — Content: John 21 opens on the Sea of Tiberias, where seven disciples have returned to fishing — whether from necessity, confusion, or occupation is unstated, but the narrative treats their overnight failure as theologically significant. A stranger on the shore directs them to cast the net on the right side; the miraculous catch triggers the Beloved Disciple’s recognition (“It is the Lord”), and Peter’s characteristically impulsive response — wrapping his outer garment and plunging into the sea. A charcoal fire awaits them on shore, with fish already cooking and bread ready, and Jesus feeds them in an act that deliberately echoes both the feeding of the five thousand and the Emmaus meal. The meal complete, Jesus turns to Peter in a three-fold interrogation — “Do you love me?” — mirroring the three-fold denial of the charcoal fire in the courtyard (18:17–27). Each “Do you love me?” is followed by a commission: “Feed my lambs / Tend my sheep / Feed my sheep.” The third exchange introduces a prediction of Peter’s death — the very cross-shaped discipleship Peter had once fled. The section closes with “Follow me.” Peter immediately deflects toward the Beloved Disciple; Jesus redirects with sovereign indifference to comparative concerns: “What is that to you? You follow me.” The chapter closes with the narrator’s authentication of the Beloved Disciple as the eyewitness author of the Gospel, and a final hyperbolic statement about the inexhaustible fullness of Jesus’s deeds.

This Text — Intent: God is seeking to accomplish through this passage the restoration of broken disciples to commissioned ministry — demonstrating that the risen Christ does not merely forgive past failure but re-calls, re-commissions, and re-directs failed followers into the specific, cross-shaped vocation they abandoned. More specifically, through Peter’s restoration, God is confronting every hearer who has denied Christ, drifted back into former patterns, or disqualified themselves in their own minds from meaningful service — and doing so not with a lecture but with a meal, a question, and a specific commission. The passage also closes the Gospel by insisting that following Jesus is never a comparative exercise: the only question that matters is not “What about him?” but “You — follow me.”

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ restores failed disciples and re-commissions them to cross-shaped, love-driven service.

Primary Claim: The risen Jesus does not retire broken followers — He meets them in their failure, feeds them, asks the only question that matters (“Do you love me?”), and re-sends them into the very ministry from which their sin had disqualified them. No failure is too deep for His restoration, and no restored disciple is exempt from the cross-shaped following He prescribes.

Interpretive Evaluation

The return to fishing (v. 3): Interpreters divide on what the disciples’ return to fishing signifies. Some read it as spiritually neutral — they needed to eat, and fishing was their trade. Others, particularly in the Reformed and Johannine scholarship tradition (Carson, Morris, Köstenberger), read the return as a quiet regression: without explicit direction from the risen Christ, the disciples have fallen back into their former occupation, uncertain of their vocational future. The text does not moralize the return; it simply narrates the failure (they caught nothing). The Reformed reading notes that the fruitlessness of the night’s work is theologically pointed — apart from direction from Christ, the disciples’ labor produces nothing — and that the miraculous catch occurs only when they obey the stranger’s word. This reading is preferred: the narrative pattern of failure followed by obedience followed by abundance is too deliberate to be accidental.

Peter’s three-fold “Do you love me?” and the *agapaō*/*phileō* distinction: A persistent interpretive controversy surrounds the shift in Greek vocabulary: Jesus uses *agapaō* in the first two questions and *phileō* in the third, while Peter uses *phileō* throughout. Some interpreters (notably older commentators) have built elaborate distinctions — that Jesus is asking for self-sacrificial love (*agapaō*) and Peter can only offer affectionate love (*phileō*), and that Jesus’s final capitulation to *phileō* represents an accommodation to Peter’s weakness. This reading should be *qualified* without being adopted wholesale. Carson’s careful lexical analysis demonstrates that John uses *agapaō* and *phileō* interchangeably elsewhere in the Gospel (cf. 3:35 and 5:20 for the Father’s love for the Son; 11:3 and 11:36 for love of Lazarus), making a sharp dogmatic distinction between the two verbs unsupportable. The more likely significance is the *number three* — the three-fold structure mirrors the three-fold denial and constitutes a complete, public, relational restoration — not the lexical variation. The Reformed reading follows Carson and Köstenberger here: the vocabulary variation is a stylistic feature of Johannine prose, not the interpretive key to the passage.

Verse 15 — “More than these”: What is the referent of “more than these”? Three readings have been proposed: (1) Do you love me more than you love these [fishing implements, this former life]? (2) Do you love me more than these [other disciples] love me? (3) Do you love me more than these [other disciples, whom you also love]? Reading (2) is most contextually compelling — it directly recalls Peter’s boast in 13:37 (“I will lay down my life for you”) and implicitly in Mark 14:29 (“Even if all fall away, I will not”). Jesus is pressing the wound of Peter’s self-confident comparative love, not asking about boats and nets. The Reformed reading prefers (2): Jesus is not extracting a general declaration of devotion but confronting specifically the pride that preceded the fall.

The “Beloved Disciple” and authorship (vv. 20–24): Roman Catholic tradition, and some critical scholarship, has raised questions about the Beloved Disciple’s identity and the reliability of authorial claims in verses 24–25. The Reformed reading, following the historic Johannine authorship position, takes the narrator’s self-authentication at face value: the Beloved Disciple is the eyewitness author of the Gospel, and the community of disciples affirms his testimony. This does not require resolving every historical question about compositional process but does take the text’s own claim seriously as part of its canonical authority.

Universalism and “What is that to you?” (v. 22): Some readers, particularly in more mystical or pluralist traditions, have read Jesus’s deflection (“If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”) as a statement of Jesus’s sovereign freedom over all people’s eternal destinies — an opening toward universalism. This reading should be *refuted*: the context is entirely about vocational calling and comparative concern, not about the scope of salvation. Jesus is not making a statement about the Beloved Disciple’s ultimate destiny or about anyone else’s; He is shutting down Peter’s deflection and re-focusing him on his own call.

Key Canonical Support

- **Luke 5:1–11** — The miraculous catch of fish at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, where Peter’s response is “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” The echo in John 21 is unmistakable: the same water, the same nets, the same fruitless night, the same miraculous abundance, and again a commission — “From now on you will be catching men.” The bookend structure shows that Jesus’s method of calling and re-calling disciples does not change.
- **John 18:17–27** — Peter’s three-fold denial around a charcoal fire (*anthrakia*, appearing only in 18:18 and 21:9 in the entire New Testament). The deliberate verbal echo is the interpretive key to Peter’s restoration: the same setting, the same number, now reversed. Denial becomes confession; the fire of shame becomes the fire of fellowship.

- **Isaiah 40:11** — “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.” The commission to “feed my lambs / tend my sheep / feed my sheep” locates Peter’s ministry within the shepherding imagery that belongs properly to God Himself (Ezekiel 34) and to Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10). Peter is not given an independent ministry — he is deputized into the shepherding office of Christ.
- **Romans 5:20–21** — “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Peter’s three-fold denial is not merely forgiven — it is the occasion for a three-fold public restoration and commission. The pattern of John 21 is grace running after and overcoming the measure of failure, not merely meeting it.
- **Galatians 2:11–14** — Paul’s confrontation of Peter at Antioch shows that Peter’s restoration did not make him immune to future failure; it re-commissioned a forgiven sinner, not a perfected saint. This canonical witness keeps the restoration realistic and guards against over-reading John 21 as a transformation into sinlessness.

Aim: To drive every hearer who has drifted, denied, or self-disqualified back to the one question Jesus asks — “Do you love me?” — and to show that an honest answer to that question re-opens the door to commissioned ministry that no failure has permanently closed.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Narrator’s introduction: Jesus appeared again at the Sea of Tiberias	“Again” — third appearance (v. 14); deliberate counting by the author
2	Seven disciples listed: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, sons of Zebedee, two others	Nathanael (first called, John 1) bookends the Gospel; “two others” unnamed
3	Peter announces he is going fishing; others join; they catch nothing all night	Night fishing without the Lord = fruitless labor; theological weight in the failure
4	Jesus stands on the shore at dawn; disciples do not recognize Him	Recognition pattern matches 20:14–15 (Mary) and Luke 24:16 (Emmaus)

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5	Jesus asks if they have any fish; they answer no	“Children” (<i>paidia</i>) — term of affectionate address; the question exposes their need
6	Cast the net on the right side — they cannot haul the net due to the abundance	Obedience to the word precedes abundance; pattern of Luke 5 repeated
7a	The Beloved Disciple: “It is the Lord”	Insight precedes action; love recognizes Christ
7b	Peter wraps his outer garment and throws himself into the sea	Characteristic impulsivity; desire for Christ drives action
8	The other disciples come in the boat, dragging the net (about 100 yards)	Practical detail establishing realistic distance; they do not abandon the catch
9	A charcoal fire (<i>anthrakia</i>), fish, and bread already present	The Lord prepares the meal — He does not need their catch; <i>anthrakia</i> echoes 18:18
10–11	Jesus asks them to bring fish; Peter hauls the net ashore — 153 large fish, net unbroken	153: debated symbolism (nations, fullness, mathematical perfection); net unbroken = unity of the catch
12–13	Jesus says “Come and have breakfast”; none dare ask who He is — they know	Reverent recognition without demand for verification; Jesus takes and distributes — eucharistic echo
14	Narrator notes: this was the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after resurrection	Authorial count: chapters 20–21 enumerate three appearances
15	“Do you love me more than these?” — “Yes, Lord; you know I love you” — “Feed my lambs”	First exchange; “more than these” recalls Peter’s boast; <i>agapaō</i> / <i>phileō</i> debate
16	Second exchange: same question without “more than these”; same answer; “Tend my sheep”	Progressive deepening; comparative element dropped; <i>agapaō</i> / <i>phileō</i>
17	Third exchange: Jesus uses	Grief at the third question —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	<i>phileō</i> ; Peter grieved; “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you” — “Feed my sheep”	Peter feels the weight of the three; appeal to omniscience as confession
18	Prediction of Peter’s death: “When you were young... when you are old, another will dress you and take you where you do not want to go”	Cross-shaped discipleship; the commission includes its cost
19a	Narrator’s parenthetical: “He said this to show by what kind of death he would glorify God”	Crucifixion implied; dying as glorifying God — Johannine theology of the cross (cf. 12:23–33)
19b	“Follow me”	The commission in two words; everything else is elaboration
20	Peter turns and sees the Beloved Disciple following	The deflection begins before Jesus has finished speaking
21	Peter: “Lord, what about this man?”	The universal human instinct: comparative concern deflects personal obedience
22	Jesus: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”	Sovereign freedom over every other disciple; the only relevant question is Peter’s own calling
23	Narrator corrects a circulating misunderstanding: Jesus did not say the Beloved Disciple would not die	The community already wrestling with Jesus’s words; narrator guards against misreading
24	“This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things... and we know that his testimony is true”	Authorial self-identification and communal authentication
25	“Were every one of them written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books”	Hyperbolic closing; the fullness of Christ exceeds all record; the Gospel is a selection, not a

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		compendium

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	Return to the Sea: Disciples Adrift Without Direction
2	4–8	Recognition at Dawn: The Word Brings Abundance
3	9–14	The Meal on the Shore: The Lord Who Prepares and Provides
4	15–17	Three Questions at the Charcoal Fire: Restoration by the Measure of Denial
5	18–19	The Cost Named and the Call Renewed: Follow Me Into the Cross
6	20–23	“What About Him?” — The Danger of Comparative Discipleship
7	24–25	The Witness Authenticated: The Gospel as Reliable, Inexhaustible Record

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ restores failed disciples and re-commissions them to cross-shaped, love-driven service.

Primary Claim: The risen Jesus does not retire broken followers — He meets them in their failure, feeds them, asks the only question that matters (“Do you love me?”), and re-sends them into the very ministry from which their sin had disqualified them. No failure is too deep for His restoration, and no restored disciple is exempt from the cross-shaped following He prescribes.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop disqualifying yourself and let Jesus ask you the only question He is actually asking. (*Mind/Belief*) Peter's three-fold denial had not revoked Jesus's three-fold call on his life — it had only created the occasion for Jesus to restore it publicly. Many believers carry a mental ledger of failures that they believe has permanently closed the door to meaningful ministry: the marriage that ended, the addiction that resurfaced, the moral failure that became known, the season of cold unbelief. John 21 does not minimize the failure — it matches it, point for point, denial for denial — but the risen Christ's agenda is not to review the ledger. It is to ask one question: "Do you love me?" Every mental self-disqualification that is not answered with this question is a failure to reckon with the resurrection. Christ is not asking you about your record. He is asking about your love. Let that reframe what you believe about your own future in His service.

2. Examine where you have quietly returned to fishing. (*Mind/Belief*) The disciples' return to the sea was not dramatic apostasy — it was ordinary regression, the path of least resistance when the future is unclear and the familiar is available. The net, the boat, the night shift: these are not evil things, but for these particular disciples, in this particular moment, they represent a retreat from vocation into occupation. Every believer has a version of "going fishing" — the default patterns, the former identities, the pre-conversion or pre-commission life that re-asserts itself when the way forward is unclear. The call is not to identify fishing as sinful but to recognize the fruitlessness that attends life lived outside the direction of Christ's specific word. Ask honestly: where are you working hard at something that is producing nothing, because you have returned to what you knew rather than waiting for what He commands?

3. Allow the specific grief of the three-fold question to do its work rather than deflecting it. (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 17 says plainly that Peter was grieved when Jesus asked the third time. That grief is not incidental — it is the work of restoration happening in real time. The three questions are not comfortable; they press the exact wound that most needs pressing. Many Christians seek a quick, transactional forgiveness that bypasses the grief: a general prayer of confession, an emotional moment at an altar, a private resolution to do better. John 21 presents a different shape of restoration — slow, personal, repetitive, and deliberately painful at the point of failure. Do not rush past the grief. The grief is not punishment; it is the feeling of the wound being cleaned before it is closed. Let Jesus ask the question as many times as it needs to be asked, and sit in the honest answer long enough for it to move from the mouth to the heart.

4. Feed the sheep in front of you as the concrete form your love for Jesus takes today. (*Will/Behavior*) Jesus's three-fold commission — "Feed my lambs / Tend my sheep / Feed my sheep" — translates the abstract declaration "I love you" into a specific, daily, embodied practice. Love for Jesus that does not become care for His people is a sentiment, not a reality. This commission is not given only to Peter or only to elders and pastors — it is the pattern by which every believer's love for Christ takes concrete form: in the family member who needs patient tending, the new believer who needs basic feeding, the

struggling brother or sister who needs a shepherd to notice they are missing. Ask who, specifically, Christ has placed in your life as the sheep He is calling you to feed. Name them. Go do that. This is what “I love you, Lord” looks like when it leaves the mouth and enters the week.

5. Stop asking “What about him?” and fix your eyes on your own following.

(Will/Behavior) Peter’s question about the Beloved Disciple (“Lord, what about this man?”) is so human it is almost comic — Jesus has just spoken to Peter about his own death, and Peter’s first instinct is to look sideways and ask about someone else’s calling. Jesus’s response is among the most direct in the Gospels: “What is that to you? You follow me.” Comparative discipleship — measuring one’s calling, suffering, fruitfulness, or cost against another person’s — is not merely spiritually unhealthy; it is a direct deflection from the call Jesus is issuing to you, specifically, right now. The chronic comparison of your calling to your spouse’s, your pastor’s, your friend’s, the person on social media who appears to be doing more or suffering less — all of it falls under the same sovereign rebuke: “What is that to you?” There is only one question, and it is addressed to you in the second person singular: “You — follow me.”

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 21 teaches that the risen Christ exercises active, personal, and restorative lordship over His failed disciples — not merely announcing their forgiveness but re-commissioning them into the specific ministry their failure had interrupted. The passage demonstrates that Christ’s shepherding office (established in John 10) is not merely a title He holds but a practice He extends through human under-shepherds who have themselves been fed by Him. The miraculous catch and the prepared meal both testify to Christ’s sufficiency prior to and independent of human effort: the disciples catch nothing without His word, and the meal is ready before they arrive. The three-fold restoration of Peter reveals that Christ’s method of dealing with human failure is not erasure but redemption — the exact contour of the failure becomes the occasion and the shape of the restoration. Finally, the closing verses affirm that the whole Gospel, and the whole ministry of the risen Christ, exceeds any written record — He is inexhaustibly more than even an eyewitness account can contain.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 21 powerfully displays sovereign grace as the framework for human vocation — the disciples cannot catch a single fish apart from Christ’s word, and Peter cannot tend a single sheep apart from Christ’s commission. The passage guards against both works-righteousness (ministry as self-generated achievement) and despair (failure as disqualification from grace). Peter’s restoration is a gospel event, not a moral recovery: he is not restored because he has demonstrated

sufficient remorse or reformed his character, but because the risen Christ sovereignly recalls him. The cross-shaped future Jesus prescribes for Peter (“another will carry you where you do not want to go”) grounds discipleship not in triumphalism but in the Pauline theology of cruciform ministry (2 Corinthians 4:7–12) — the minister glorifies God precisely through weakness and costly obedience. The closing section’s insistence that Jesus’s works exceed all record is a doxological statement consonant with Reformed emphasis on God’s inexhaustible fullness and the insufficiency of all creaturely categories to contain Him. The entire chapter is a pastoral application of what Reformed theology confesses doctrinally: God’s electing grace does not merely forgive — it calls, restores, and sends.

Main Takeaway

The risen Christ has not reviewed your failure and concluded you are finished. He has come to the shore where you are working at nothing, built a fire, made you breakfast, and He has one question: “Do you love me?” Answer it honestly — out loud, three times if necessary — and you will discover that the commission you thought your sin had closed is still open, the sheep He means for you to feed are still waiting, and the cross-shaped path He calls “Follow me” is the only one worth walking.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Psychologizing Peter’s restoration into a therapy session rather than a gospel event.** The three questions are often preached as a technique for emotional healing — “Jesus gives Peter a chance to say ‘I love you’ three times to undo the three denials, so Peter can feel better about himself.” This sentimentalizes what is actually a public, covenantal, vocational restoration. Peter is not being given closure; he is being given a commission. The grief is real, but the grief serves the commission — it is not the point. Preachers who focus primarily on Peter’s emotional journey miss that Jesus’s primary movement is forward (“Feed my sheep / Follow me”), not backward into the courtyard.
- **Over-building the *agapaō*/*phileō* distinction into a sermon spine.** The temptation to hang an entire message on the vocabulary shift — “Jesus asks for *agapaō*, Peter can only offer *phileō*, and Jesus graciously accepts less” — produces a sermon the text does not support and that requires the hearer to trust the preacher’s Greek over the text’s own interchangeable use of the two verbs elsewhere in John. The three-fold structure, not the lexical variation, is the interpretive key. Preachers who take the vocabulary route will also have to explain why Jesus “gives up” and settles for Peter’s lesser love — an implication the text never intends.
- **Preaching verses 15–17 in isolation from John 18.** The three-fold restoration only achieves its full force when the hearer has the three-fold denial explicitly in view. A

preacher who does not take the congregation back to the charcoal fire (*anthrakia*) of 18:18 — the only other occurrence of that specific word in the New Testament — will produce a sermon about repentance in general rather than about the precise, measured, resurrection grace that reverses a specific, named failure. The verbal echo is the sermon.

- **Moralizing “Do you love me?” into a bare behavioral command — “Try harder to love Jesus.”** The question is restorative and diagnostic before it is imperative. Jesus is not scolding Peter into greater emotional effort; He is creating the relational conditions for a genuine recommissioning. An application that amounts to “you need to love Jesus more — so work on that” has missed the direction of the text’s movement. The love Jesus is eliciting from Peter is not a prerequisite he must achieve before he qualifies for ministry; it is the orientation that is renewed through the encounter itself.
- **Treating “What is that to you? You follow me” as a general principle about minding your own business.** Jesus’s rebuke of comparative concern is often preached as a general ethical lesson about avoiding gossip, envy, or unhealthy comparison. These applications are not wrong, but they flatten a text that is specifically about vocational calling. Jesus is not teaching a social virtue — He is shutting down the specific tendency to use another person’s calling as a reason to delay or deflect obedience to one’s own. The rebuke is vocational before it is ethical.
- **Neglecting the 153 fish and the unbroken net without warrant.** Preachers often either (a) spend significant time on speculative numerology that the text does not develop, or (b) skip the detail entirely as irrelevant. A third path: note that the specificity of the number (not “many” but “153”) and the intactness of the net testify to the eyewitness character of the account, and that the unbroken net carrying all 153 intact has been read canonically (Augustine) as an image of the church bearing all those given to Christ without loss — which is consistent with John 6:39 (“I shall lose nothing of all that he has given me”). Flag the connection if it genuinely illuminates the passage without making numerology the point.
- **Closing the sermon on Peter rather than on Jesus.** John 21 is a chapter about Peter’s restoration and recommissioning, but it is ultimately a chapter about the risen Christ — His sufficiency (the meal prepared before they arrived), His knowledge (“Lord, you know all things”), His sovereign freedom over every disciple’s calling, and His inexhaustible fullness (v. 25). A sermon that ends with Peter’s courage, Peter’s love, or Peter’s future martyrdom has made the wrong person the hero. The chapter ends not with Peter but with a doxological overflow: the world could not contain the books. End there.