

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Encountering the Life-Changing Jesus

Jesus, For All Those Who Fail

Study #2

(From the Gospels; the story of Simon Peter)

Introduction: What to do with Pete...

Baseball has never been my game. It requires a certain skill set that I didn't work hard to acquire. So, when I tried out for a Little League team in 6th grade, the coach cut me. I've never forgiven baseball.

And I've never paid much attention to the game, the players, or to the statistics that baseball fans love to quote.

Some stats, though, do merit attention, even from a non-fan like me. Consider the following collection of stats, all from one player:

- 150 games played in each of 17 seasons.
- 500 games at each of 5 different positions.
- 44 consecutive games safely landing on base.
- 24 consecutive seasons played.
- the most ever hits (4,256), singles (3,312), at bats (14,053), games played (3,562), safe on base (5,929)
- 1963 - Rookie of the Year
- 1969 - winner of the Golden Glove Award.
- 1973 - League's Most Valuable Player
- 1975 - World Series Most Valuable Player.
- 17 times named to the National League's All-Star team.
- 3 times played on World Series winning teams.
- .303 lifetime batting average.

Those of you who know and love baseball already know that I'm talking about Pete Rose, aka "Charlie Hustle." He was, without a doubt, one of the greatest baseball players ever.

Major League baseball has a way to honor its great ones. They are inducted into the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, Ohio.

But Pete Rose isn't in the Hall of Fame. Other players with far less impressive stats ARE in the Hall, but not Pete. Why not Pete?

Well, Pete Rose is not in the Hall of Fame because he committed one of baseball's cardinal sins. While he was still an active player, he bet on the game.

Major league baseball has a penalty for those who violate that rule, and it is a stiff penalty. They are banned from the game for life. They can never be considered for induction into the Hall of Fame.

So, now Pete Rose sits UN-inducted on a stack of statistics that would merit induction, all because he gambled and lost by betting on the game.

Now, among diehard baseball fans, the debate rages as to whether Pete Rose should be allowed in the Hall of Fame, despite his guilt. Some say he should be kept out. Others say he should be let in.

As that debate continues to rage about what to do with Pete Rose, you and I are going to think this morning about another "Pete", this one, from the Bible.

Simon Peter's First Steps

Fun Facts to Know and Tell

This Pete (Simon Peter) lived in the small community of Bethsaida (John 1:44) on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. His father was John. Peter and his brother, Andrew, were fishermen.

One day, while Simon was minding his own fishing business, Andrew came running up to him, announcing, **[John 1:41] “We have found the Messiah!”**

Now the Jews had been looking forward to the arrival of the Messiah for centuries. The Messiah would bring salvation. Andrew’s news was huge.

He dragged Simon to meet Jesus. and the initial encounter between Jesus and Simon, while brief, was memorable.

Simon Meets Jesus

Renamed by Jesus (John 1)

Seeing what no one else who looked at Simon would have seen, Jesus saw the possibility of strength and stability, so He gave him a nickname: **Peter** (Greek for stone/rock).

[42] “You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).”¹

That was their initial meeting. At some point not long after, Jesus gave Peter an offer that he really didn’t want to refuse.

Called to follow Jesus (Matthew 4)

[Matthew 4:18] Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. [19] And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” [20] Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

From that day forward Peter walked with Jesus. He listened to Jesus’ teaching and witnessed Jesus’ miracles.

¹ To make rock out of inconsistent, bombastic Simon was a miracle. Yet that is precisely the kind of miracle which is the greatest continuous evidence of Christianity - transformed lives. The shell is the same, but there is a new core.

He was Jesus’ disciple, His follower. Literally. Everywhere that Jesus went, Peter was sure to go. Every step was a next step with Jesus.

About a year into His three-year ministry, Jesus shifted His focus from the large crowds who were always tagging after Him and narrowed that focus down to a smaller group.

Set Apart as an Apostle (Matthew 10; Mark 3; Luke 6)

And, for the final two years of Jesus’ life, He poured Himself into that smaller band of men and women. In particular, He chose twelve men who would be His “sent ones” - *apostles*. He disciplined them. He let gain unique insights into the ways of God.

And at the start of every listing of the apostles in the Gospels is Simon Peter.² To be an *apostle* was to be one of the Twelve Jesus sent out to act in His name. Peter was chief among the Twelve.

Jesus spoke more directly to Peter than to the others. He challenged Peter in ways that He didn’t challenge the others.

So, what kind of a man was Simon Peter? Well, for one thing, he was a great question asker. We should never downplay the importance of good, honest questions. After all, Jesus never did.

He welcomed questions and some of Peter’s questions opened the door for some of Jesus’ best answers.

Simon Peter’s Giant Steps

Jesus’ Best Ever “Straight Man”

How many times must I forgive? (Matthew 18:21)

Once, Peter asked Jesus, **[21] “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”**

The question launched Jesus into one of our favorite parables. It’s the story of the guy who had been forgiven a ten-million-dollar

² Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14

debt, but who wouldn't forgive one of his fellow slaves a one-hundred-dollar debt.

Let's remember that this parable was given in response to Peter's question.

Help us know the future! (Mark 13:3ff)

Another time, after Jesus had been talking about future events, Peter casually asked, **[13:4] "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?"**

Jesus took that ball and ran with it, presenting the apostles with the most detailed teaching about end times events He ever gave.³

No doubt about it. Peter's natural curiosity and question-asking ways have served us well.

In addition to being a great question-asker, Simon Peter was honored to be present at nearly every major event in Jesus' ministry.

Private Moments

When Jesus was called to restore to life the young daughter of a prominent synagogue official who had died, He gladly agreed to do so.

The only three apostles invited to witness the miracle were Peter, James, and John.⁴

On Easter Sunday morning, who should be the first among the apostles to see the empty tomb? Peter, along with John!⁵

And Peter's prominent role as chief apostle continued well after Jesus died and rose again.

Post-Resurrection

When it was time to get everybody to choose another apostle to round out the group to an even dozen again after Judas' death, who was the spokesman? Peter! (Acts 1:15)

When it was time to bring a Christian message to Jerusalem, who was the first one to deliver? Peter! (Acts 2:14ff)

When it was necessary to deliver a message of rebuke to a couple who lied to the Holy Spirit and to the church, who spoke? Peter! (Acts 5)

When it was time to welcome non-Jews into the church for the very first time - Samaritans and Gentiles - who extended that welcome? Peter! (Acts 8; 10)

That is Peter. Leader of the church, chief among the apostles, one of the three closest friends of Jesus. Writer of two New Testament letters. A giant among men.

But that is not ALL Peter was.

If we want to get a complete picture of Simon Peter, we need to look at his other side. And there was, certainly, another side.

He was a remarkable man, but Peter was by no means a perfect man. And, in his imperfections he reminds me a lot of the man I see in the mirror every day.

He might remind you of somebody you know, too.

Peter's feet were solid clay. Watch Him on the night after one of Jesus' most famous miracles.

Simon Peter's Missteps

Out of Focus (Matthew 14)

Walks on water...

³ See Matthew 24 and Mark 13.

⁴ See Matthew 9; Mark 5; Luke 8.

⁵ See John 20.

The Lord had just multiplied a few fish and loaves so that thousands of people could eat to their heart's content.

When the crowds left at the end of the day, Jesus sent the twelve apostles across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while He went away, alone, to pray.

After several hours of rowing against the wind, the disciples were exhausted. Then, still out in the middle of the sea, they looked up from their rowing to see Someone walking toward them - on the lake!

They all cried out, **[26] "It is a ghost!"**

We understand their fear. If we were out fishing on Medina Lake, minding our own business, and some guy walked up to us, we'd freak out, too.

Well, this Someone was Jesus. And Jesus put their fears to rest, with, **[27] "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."**

When Peter recognized that it was Jesus who was standing out there on the water, he said, **[28] "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."**

Jesus encouraged Peter with the simple word, **"Come!"**

With that, Peter got out of the boat and walked toward Jesus.

...and sinks like a stone.

We don't know how far he walked before he realized where his faith and boldness had placed him. Maybe he took quite a few steps.

But, after walking some distance, Peter's attention turned from Jesus to the sea. He lost focus. Fear gripped him. He sank like a *petros*.

While sinking, Peter cried out, **[30] "Lord, save me!"**

And of course, the Lord did save him. Jesus immediately reached out His hand, took hold of Peter, and pulled him back up to the surface with, **[31] "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"**

Peter's sinking spell was caused by a failure of faith. The chief apostle sank because he stopped trusting Jesus.

Or consider another time when Peter started out really well and ended up in a mess.

Out of Position (Matthew 16)

From a great confession...

Matthew tells us about the time that Jesus had asked His twelve apostles what the crowds were saying about Him.

He wasn't insecure. He just wanted to know what the word on the street was about Him.

The twelve reported that they had heard people say that He was a prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah, or even John the Baptist back from the dead.

Jesus then turned the question back to them and asked, **[Matthew 16:15] "But who do YOU say that I am?"**

Which one of the apostles do you think took that question? Right! **[16] Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

We think, "Way to go, Peter." But then, IMMEDIATELY after his "great confession" Peter suffered a "great goof."

...to a great goof

Jesus went on to tell the disciples that He was going to go to Jerusalem, that he was going to suffer at the hands of the Jewish

leadership, AND that He was then going to be scourged and crucified by the Romans.

When Peter heard that, he pulled Jesus aside and rebuked Him.⁶

To which Jesus replied, **[23] “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.”**

Jesus addressed the chief apostle as Satan because he (Peter) had so quickly forgotten that he was dealing with **“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

One of the more light-hearted of Peter’s verbal gaffes occurred during a mountain-top experience.

Out of Nowhere (Matthew 17)

A miraculous transfiguration...

Jesus had taken Peter and James and John up on top of a high mountain, leaving the other apostles down at the bottom.

While they were all together, Jesus was transfigured. Matthew writes that, **“His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.”**

While this was going on, two of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, showed up and began speaking with Jesus.

...followed by a ridiculous suggestion.

Evidently overcome with exhaustion after the hard climb to the top of the mountain, Peter and James and John had somehow managed to fall asleep. They awoke to this other-worldly scene.

This would have been a good time for listening. Peter, though, decided to speak, instead.

[4] “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”⁷

To which the Father replied, from heaven, **[5] “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”**

Out of focus. Out of position. Out of nowhere. Peter’s behavior while walking with Jesus was sometimes deeply flawed.

And Peter is famous for one more spectacular failure. And it wasn’t as if he had not been warned.

Out of Bounds (Matthew 26)

An apostolic argument...

On the night before Jesus was crucified, and during the Passover meal with the apostles, Jesus had predicted, **[31] “You will all fall away because of Me this night.”**

Peter assured Jesus, **[33] “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”**

Jesus looked straight at Peter and told him bluntly, **[34] Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”**

⁶ Matthew tells us that Peter said, **[Matthew 16:32] “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.”**

⁷ Mark adds, **[9:6] For he did not know what to answer.** Silence would have worked great, Peter...

With an amazing display of arrogance and a total lack of self-awareness, Peter replied, [35] ***“Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny You!”***

Later than night, after the meal, and after Jesus’ betrayal by Judas, and after His arrest, and after all the apostles fled into the night, Peter found himself in the courtyard of the High Priest, near the place where Jesus was being tried by the Sanhedrin.

...leads to an apostolic debacle.

While he was warming himself by the fire, he was asked by bystanders, not once, not twice, but three times, *“Don’t you know that Jesus fellow? Aren’t you one of those Galileans who used to follow Jesus? Aren’t you one of His disciples?”*

Peter was given three golden opportunities to stand up and declare to everyone who might listen, *“You bet I am His follower! I know Him and trust Him and will follow Him to the death.”*

But no. Not once, not twice, but three times, Peter replied, *“I don’t even know what you are talking about! I do NOT know this Jesus. I swear by all that is holy, He’s nothing to me.”*

As soon as the words left his mouth a rooster crowed, confirming his failure. Realizing what he had done, Peter went outside and wept bitterly.

And THAT’s Peter.⁸

He was the lead spokesman for the disciples, who, when it was all on the line, spoke cowardly lies. He was the chief apostle and the lead bungler. Simon Peter was one very squishy “rock.”

⁸ There is much of Peter’s story we haven’t touched on this morning. For further study, check out: Peter to Jesus after the feeding of the five thousand (John 6); Peter in the Upper Room (especially John 13); Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26; John 18); Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2); Peter acting hypocritically (Galatians 2).

So, what do you do with a Simon Peter? That’s quite a question.

And now, again, let’s think about the other Peter, Pete Rose.

Will that Pete ever be inducted into Cooperstown, Ohio’s Baseball Hall of Fame? Probably not, because, while His record-breaking career merits induction, he broke rules that merit a ban.

Is that how it will end for Simon Peter? Like Pete’s, Peter’s stat sheet boasts remarkable deeds. Sadly, his rap sheet is just as long.

Did he, like Pete Rose, commit the unpardonable sin? Wouldn’t a triple denial of Jesus rank up there with betting on baseball? Wouldn’t you think that his actions in the courtyard would at least result in a lifetime suspension?

Will Simon Peter - or will any of us who have failed - ever have a shot at God’s Hall of Fame? Is it possible that we will hear, ***“Well done!”*** from a Jesus we haven’t served perfectly?

We don’t have to wonder, because we get to see how the resurrected Jesus dealt with Peter, post-denial when we turn to the last chapter of John’s Gospel.

Simon Peter’s Fresh Steps (John 21)

We back in what was familiar territory for the disciples. They were on the Sea of Galilee, fishing. On this night, though, they had been fishing all night and had no fish to show for it.

I get that. It is a miracle any time I do catch fish, so I understand getting skunked while fishing.

But there on the Sea of Galilee, the miracle was that after a night of not-catching-fish, Jesus showed up. And, as had happened before,⁹ when Jesus showed up, the fish started biting.

⁹ See Luke 5:1-11.

As they watched the fish rush into the nets, the Apostle John turned to Peter and said, **[John 21:7] “It is the Lord.”**

Peter promptly dove overboard and swam to Jesus leaving the others to bring the boat to land.

They had hauled the fish on to the shore and finished up a breakfast of fish tacos when Jesus turned His attention to Peter.

By this time, Jesus and Peter have seen each other a couple of times since the resurrection. To this point, though, they had yet to speak about the unspeakable failure of Peter’s denials.

In what was likely the first private moment Peter has had with Jesus since Peter had run away in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked, **[15] Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”**

Jesus had given Simon the new name - Peter - early in their time together. But here, he calls him by his old name, “Simon.”

Was this a not-so-subtle statement to Peter that he hadn’t been much of a “rock” lately? I bet Peter would have noted Jesus’ use of *Simon*.

“Simon, would you claim to love Me more than these others love Me?” (Peter had claimed that he wouldn’t fall away even if all the others did...)

Peter’s response? **[15] “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”**

Accepting that answer, Jesus said, **[15b] “Tend My lambs.”**

After that weird, out of the blue question, Peter was probably ready to move on and talk about the weather or anything else.

Not Jesus. He had a second question for Simon Peter.

[16] “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

By this question, Jesus wasn’t asking a comparative question. Just a simple, absolute question.

Simon gave another simple answer.

[16] “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

To which Jesus replied as He had before. **[16b] “Shepherd My sheep.”**

No doubt Peter was taken aback that Jesus had asked him the same question twice. When the same question came to him a third time, he was undone.

[17] “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

When Jesus spoke this last time, I’m betting Peter heard a rooster crowing in the background.

The third question brought to mind his three denials. He was forced to remember the night before Jesus died when he had said, “I don’t know Jesus” and “I don’t know Jesus” and “I don’t know Jesus.”

[17] 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.”

Then Jesus told Peter a third time, **[17] “Tend My sheep.”**¹⁰

That’s how Jesus dealt with Simon Peter. I believe that Jesus’ interaction with Peter serves as a template for how He deals with all who fail and who sin while following Him.

Conclusion:

¹⁰ There are stylistic differences in each of Jesus’ questions and in each of Peter’s responses. I’m not dwelling on them here because, while somewhat important, the main thing is that Jesus asked Simon a similar question three separate times just as he had been asked a similar question three different times on the night of the betrayals.

After a lifetime of giant steps with Jesus, repeated blunders, and one monumental failure, Jesus didn't bench Peter, cut him from the team, or shame him. He did something else entirely.

But, before looking at the two elements in play in the Jesus / Peter exchange, I first want us to see the context in which this is all taking place.

It is a setting of grace.

Jesus has sought out the disciples at the beach. He knew where they were - out fishing - and He went to where they were.

He miraculously and abundantly provided for their needs and then lovingly interacted with them over a meal.

And watch how He seeks our Peter, individually. Jesus didn't rail against Peter in front of the others, didn't call him names, didn't shout. He talked with Peter one-on-one. There is gentleness and tenderness and kindness here.

So, first, by the three questions, Jesus guided Peter toward an inside look. By the questions, He prompted Peter to remember and to honestly look at - no pretending - the ugliness of what he had done.

After a moral failure, this is the all-important step that must precede moving forward.

Jesus calls us to admit what we have done. No sugarcoating. Confess. Own your failure and your sin. Accept that consequences may well come. Travel the painful, sweet path of repentance. And accept Jesus' grace and forgiveness.

Then, notice the second element of this exchange between Jesus and Peter. He assigned Peter. "**Tend My lambs**" (v. 15) and "**Shepherd My sheep**" (v. 16) and "**Tend My sheep**" (v. 17) and later, as He had said at the very beginning, "**Follow Me.**" (v. 22)

Jesus re-commissioned Simon Peter and He re-commissions you and me when we confess and repent. He puts us back into service.

Several years ago, our church held what we called a "Restoration Service" for a man who had suffered a personal failure.

He had become a part of our church and we loved this man dearly. He had gone through a process of honestly confronting himself, taking an inside look, and confession.

Several people spoke on his behalf that night about the changes they had seen in him since his confession of wrongdoing.

We had come together on that night to celebrate God's work of restoring a broken life and there was a lot of joy and tears on that night.

At the close, taking our cue from John 21, we re-commissioned him. And the words that were spoken directly to him were these:

[Matthew 28:18] "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

I can testify that this man has been "on mission" for the Great Commission ever since that night, just as Peter was all about tending Jesus' sheep for the rest of his life.

Jesus wants to take all of us who have failed-while-following Him (it's a very big club) through this same process of restoration.

Admit sin. Accept God's gracious forgiveness. Take your own next step with Jesus and help others take their own next steps with Jesus. Follow.