

## **The power of loyalty (Graziano Crepaldi)**

***Do we understand that love for God means loving those He loves and humbly serving them? That's the love He likes to see in us. True loyalty to the Lord and love for Him leaves no room for arrogance and superiority.***

Since more than 20 years God has called us to minister in different locations and experience powerful breakthroughs in places that have been very close to the Gospel. We have seen many teams and new communities coming to life and Jesus has built his Church in regions that were totally transformed through the power of his love.

We had the privilege to be involved in some of the most significant movements of God in Europe, Asia and Africa. In our difficult task of training leaders and disciples able to multiply the values of the Kingdom of God we have realized the importance of loyalty in relationship.

Jesus said to Simon Peter "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." (John 21:15-17)

In these verses we read that Jesus himself after more than 3 years of living together with his friend and disciple Peter asked him: "Do you love me more than these?"

This question seem very challenging and we need to examine it closely. Was Jesus suddenly no more able to see the heart of Peter? Was Jesus so "offended" from the sin of Peter, that was not willing to give him a second chance? Why did he not just clap him on the shoulder and give him a "big spiritual smile" of forgiveness?

Everybody experienced in some ways what it means to be betrayed. We know the pain of broken trust and disappointment in relationships and it is clear that we cannot easily forget and move on. Somebody once said "It takes years to build up trust, and only seconds to destroy it" and therefore we know that our hearts can be incredible effected from lies, critics and inappropriate behaviors. What about those who had betrayed? There is not an easy solution for those who have hurt someone else in a such way that seems impossible to restore relationships again. These people carry as well a huge pain and have a deep longing for a second chance. I remember so clearly what I felt in my heart when my parents and spiritual leaders have given me a new chance after doing mistakes or failing to do what I have promised. I felt restored, loved and reached a new depth in relationship with them. I was fully aware that was not easy for them to extend grace and have patience with me. I have not deserved their forgiveness and right in that place of repentance, I started to take some important decisions to learn from God what loyalty really means.

There is often a lot of confusion concerning loyalty in our teams and sometimes we have handle deep issues with superficiality and ignorance on the ways God wants to restore relationship. We remember a situation of some years ago when we have met with some people that have deeply betrayed our friendship through accusations and lies causing huge challenges for our ministry and family. When the issues came to the light, our friends quickly apologize and excused their behavior with the words: "we have spoken these negative words, because we honor you and we love you very much!". We have never been felt so dishonor like in that day! The story of Jesus and Peter in John 21 is teaching us a different way to approach reconciliation and restoration in relationships.

Peter was deeply grieved at Jesus third question, because in those moments he had face his heart and the pain of his failure. Jesus gave him the opportunity to remove his three denials by speaking out three times affirming words of love for his beloved Savior.

We learnt in this event that is not important how big are our past failures and sins, Jesus is ready to give us another chance because He is loyal to us. Sometime we wish we could reverse and take back some of the words we have spoken, but this is not possible, but we can though speak new words of love that have power to heal our relationships. **"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)**

The questions of Jesus "do you love me more than these?" was testing the love motivation of Peter and contain important applications. We also need to evaluate our own love and loyalty to God and to our friends at the light of what Jesus taught to his disciples in that event.

Peter had made in few circumstances arrogant claims that he had a superior love and character than the other disciples. He said once: **"Even if all the others abandon you, I'll never do that."** (Mk. 14:31) He was confident he was going to lay down his life for Jesus. In these years we have heard many people in churches getting upset when their leaders are trying to spot out some of their character issues and remind people about their attitudes. Some are saying: "Jesus will never do that" or "you are like my father and tell me these words because you don't love me" or "the pastor I got to know in the books and on the web has more love than you and will never confront me for such an issue". Jesus did confront Peter and after a good morning breakfast on the shore was asking Peter: "After the recent events, do you still consider yourself as superior to the other disciples?"

Peter came down to earth. He didn't excuse himself or accuse Jesus of not protect him from the enemies. He was instead deeply touched and let Jesus minister to him. Are we also thinking to be so "special" like Peter? Is there any superiority in our heart that separates us from God and the others? Is there something of ourself that makes us proud and gives us the feeling to be such a "good person"? Do we think we have a deeper commitment than most Christians or a better knowledge of the Bible or act with more Christ-like love? I have honestly felt few times offended from God. It seems to me that He has shown no respect on my certificates, past experiences and "special" leadership position. All of these privileges still didn't make me be better than others. The landing has been hard, but it was very healthy for me and for those around me. As Paul said: **"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."** (Galatians 6:14)

It is strange to be proud on something that is actually killing you inside. I would rather like to hide my defeats and unsuccessful experiences and focus on the good things. God works the best in my heart the other way around. Jesus said to Peter "if you love me as you say, feed my lambs." In other words, we show real love for Jesus as we humble ourselves, love those He loves and serve their deepest needs! Do we understand that love for God means loving those He loves and humbly serving them? That's the love He likes to see in us. True loyalty to the Lord and love for Him leaves no room for arrogance and superiority. Peter had to see how far he could fall, how miserably he could fail, so he could be lifted to right relationships with the Lord and the people in his life.

Where did Jesus find Peter that morning? The boats were again on the water, nets and all the tools of the fisherman's trade were again in use. Peter went back to his old job and to his security based life style. His future and plans were at risk, he needed to do something. He was definitely disappointed with Jesus' plan to die on the cross. He probably imagine an other vision for his team. Jesus wanted as well to ask Peter: "Do you love me in spite of all these difficult events?"

What are the symbols of our security? Maybe they're the tools of our trade or some of the possessions we have worked hard to gain. Some time ago a couple came to us and wanted to say goodbye before leave one of our discipleship group. We asked our friends to share what they had in their hearts. They thanked us for our work and told us that we have been a good help for them to start their new life with God, but now they wanted to join a nicer church, a better team and get inputs from leaders more mature than us.

This answer got our attention. In the few years they have been with us, they hoped to meet people like them and have more fun in church meetings. They didn't like to be in a discipleship family, they dreamed about a Disneyland church and didn't want to hear about our weakness and how God is working to change us. They wanted to have leaders that were well finished, nice looking, with no problems and able to preach about success and prosperity. If I can choose a very appropriate mission statement for our life and ministry in these years is actually: "We are a life-long work in progress ministry family!" It doesn't sound so attractive isn't it? We believe is very powerful, Jesus is working here!

What are the things that best symbolize what you most value in life and what gives you security? Many of these things might be important for us and we run to them in time of need. Crises time in relationships are bringing up what is really in our hearts. Many people have a longing for a secure place where they can be untouched, undisturbed, taken care and be blessed and provably remain like they are for ever! Our dreams and needs are good things, they're necessary things. But what is the most important thing? Does your life only have meaning if you can get what you want and really like? Jesus is calling us to remain loyal to his Kingdom' plans for our life, that most of the time are very different from our plans. Jesus said to Peter: "If you love me as you say, take care of my sheep."

Peter wanted to fish. Jesus wanted him to shepherd. **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. (Isaiah 55:8)**

Another observation on this story was that Peter abandoned Jesus, but remained with his friends. Is it not interesting? We have seen so many people that have been betrayed or have betrayed that withdrew from relationships like Judas. The life of these persons becomes a misery and their hope in God got lost. In our life we are called to start and restart from covenant relationships! Sadly, many are still seeking only self center relationships. They will committed to a team or a leader and even to their family as long as this is serving them. When problems and challenges come, they want to be free to move to new more interesting connections!

It's important to stress how much we must appreciate the special people God has given us; our spouses, children, parents, church family, friends. God is calling us to love them, be loyal to them and honor them. This seems an impossible task, but Jesus gave us an important key when he said **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters yes, even his own life he cannot be my disciple."** (Luke 14:26)

That doesn't sound like the Jesus we know and love. Is He really telling us to hate the people near to us? Of course not. The result of loving Jesus above all is not indifference. We are convinced that only when Jesus is becoming our first love we learn how to really love the precious people in our lives. How does the Bible tell husbands to love their wives? We're to love them **"as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."** (Eph. 5:25) In other word's we follow the example of Christ-like love to the extent of complete self-sacrifice for the ones we love.

The secret to the best love is to love Jesus first and more than everything else. Do we want to love the most important people in our life better? Then we need to love Jesus first and most. That's when we are able to love those around us with Jesus' kind of love, the best kind of love. God sees our heart and He's looking there right now. Can we recall some of our actions or words from the past that betrayed our love and loyalty to Jesus or to our leaders, family and friends?

Let's go to Jesus and confess that we have been disloyal. We have failed and sinned against God and those who loved us and that we have loved. Let's receive the forgiveness and restoration from the Father and through humility we can really reconcile and become loyal people of God.