

EXPOSITION OF JOHN

Message #78

John 21:15-17

Without a personal love for Jesus Christ, no matter what we do for God, it will amount to zero. One of the real problems for any Christian is that he/she may get all caught up in everyday life, including church life with a lot of action and motion, and lose sight of our love for Jesus Christ. One may run here and there and be involved in this or that and never take the time to really examine his or her own heart. Every now and then it is very wise for us to come back to a very basic question - "Do I do this because I love Jesus Christ?" Apparently even the Apostle Paul did this, for he said after years of ministry, "the love of Christ controls us" (II Corinthians 5:14).

I don't care who we are or even how spiritual we think we are; the truth is we all need to specifically crawl through these verses and examine ourselves. **This is a wonderful text of Scripture because it shows that it is possible to have blown it big-time as a believer and then get back on track for God and be used greatly by Him.** But there is no doubt that in order for this to happen, one must face things honestly and squarely. One must do very honest business with God. That is exactly what Peter does right here.

Breakfast was over and during the meal no one had said a word (21:12). Now Jesus was going to speak and He was going to speak to Peter. Now Peter had denied the Lord three times standing by a charcoal fire (18:18, 25-27) and this was the perfect place to restore him for now he was eating by another charcoal fire (21:9). **Just as Peter had denied Christ three times, Christ was going to question him three times, Peter was going to confess three times, and Christ was going to commission him three times.** The point of all of this is this:

JESUS CHRIST SPECIFICALLY RESTORES PETER BY QUESTIONING HIS LOVE AND BY COMMANDING HIS RESPONSIBILITIES.

What I find interesting is that all of the disciples had actually fled and run away, but the one to whom Jesus gives this specific address is Peter, who initially didn't run away. But you may be certain, all were carefully listening and all could relate. **This was a big moment for Peter for it showed these other disciples that God's calling to apostleship was still on Peter's life.**

Now what we have here breaks down nicely into three main exchanges:

EXCHANGE #1 – Jesus Christ questions Peter. **21:15-17**

There are three main questions that Jesus asks Peter in these verses:

(Question #1) - Simon Peter, Simon of John, do you love me more that these? **21:15**

By using the nouns "Simon Peter" and "Simon of John", Jesus appears to be reminding Peter that he has an old fallen humanity, from which he had been called. By repeating this to Peter, He is implying that he may live life either subject to the old nature and old man or be subject to the new life and new calling.

The verb “love” which Jesus uses here in this verse is agape (αγαπαω). So Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him at the highest possible level of love, God’s level, the level that is willing to put God’s Word and will ahead of his own will. Does he love Him, “more than these.”

There have been several views as to what this means; we will give you three:

- 1) Some have said the “more than these” refer to the fish or fishing business that Peter previously had. Peter had gone fishing and those who believe this suggest that Christ is asking Peter if he loves Him more than his secular business. It is a legitimate question to ask, but I don’t think that is what Jesus has in mind.
- 2) Others have suggested that Jesus is saying, Peter, do you think you love Me more than the rest of the disciples just because you dove into water and swam to shore before the rest of them could get here in the boat? It is true that it is good for us to examine whether what we do is motivated by a love for Christ or just religious zeal. But I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind either.
- 3) The phrase “more than these” is a reference to the fact that Peter had once promised that he would love Jesus even above the level of all the other disciples.

Just a couple of weeks before Jesus asks Peter this question, He had been in an Upper Room meeting and when Jesus said He was about to go someplace they could not go, Peter said that he would follow him even to death (John 13:36-37). He said to Jesus, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (Matthew 26:33). Furthermore he had said that, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You” (Mark 14:29-31).

So Christ’s first question to Peter is whether or not he still maintains that he loves Jesus at the highest possible level even more than all these other disciples. This is a good question for us to ask as well. Do you really love Jesus Christ more than any other person in the world?

(Question #2) - Simon of John, do you love Me? 21:16

Now the verb “love” is the same verb, agape, which means Jesus is asking Peter whether or not he loves Him at the highest level, the agape level. This time it is not in a comparison way with the other disciples; this time it is just about Him.

Now I want to zero in on this very personal question for a few moments because I believe this is a question that every single one of us needs to personally answer; I don’t care how long you have known the Lord.

Peter had personally traveled with Jesus Christ for over three years. He was the only apostle who walked on water. He was an apostle who did not run away when Jesus was taken in the Garden. He was an apostle who, in this context, dove into the water to swim to shore to meet Jesus.

The question Jesus asks him is not, Peter, do you realize you have sinned? Peter, do you realize you need forgiveness? The question is, “Peter, do you love Me?”

That is the question each of us needs to ask and answer. The implication of the question is that it is possible to be a very religious person who is involved in all kinds of religious action and still not love Jesus Christ. You could sing, give, pray, teach, work and even witness and never answer this question. Do you love Jesus Christ? That is the question Jesus asks Peter and that is the question God causes us all to ask ourselves. Do you love Jesus Christ at your highest possible level?

(Question #3) - Simon of John, do you love Me? 21:17

This time, Jesus changes the verb “love” from agape (αγαπαω) to phileo (φιλεω). The emphasis of this question is, Peter, do you love Me as your friend.

There is no possible way that Peter could have dodged the fact that just as he denied Christ three times, Christ was questioning him three times. By virtue of the repetitious questioning, this is a question we need to come back to time and time again - Do we love Jesus Christ? Do we love Him above all things? Do we love Him personally? Do we love Him as our friend?

EXCHANGE #2 – Peter answers Jesus Christ. 21:15-17

There are three answers that Peter gives to Jesus’ questions and they are revealing:

(Answer #1) - Peter’s first answer is, “Yes, Lord; You know I love You.” 21:15

In Greek, Peter uses an emphatic pronoun “you” (συ) in every one of his answers. He is specifically addressing Jesus Christ who he specifically identifies as “Lord” three times. There are two things that clearly show here that Peter is a true man of God who could be greatly used by God.

First, he does not add “more than these” to his answer. He is no longer comparing himself to anybody. He is doing his own private business with Jesus Christ. The person you really need to be concerned about as far as loving Jesus Christ is you. I guarantee you this; when we get before Jesus Christ, we aren’t going to be comparing ourselves with others; it will be our love on the line. Peter is doing his own business with God here.

Second, he changes the verb in the way he responds. Keep in mind that Jesus’ first question to Peter uses the verb agape, God’s highest kind of love. However, Peter does not respond with agape, but with phileo (φιλεω). I see real growth and integrity here in Peter. Because he was not about to say he loved the Lord at the highest possible level, knowing he had denied Him three times. Peter is really coming to terms with that right here. He knew there had been a lack in his love for Jesus Christ or he would have never failed Him.

He will use this verb all the way through this conversation. Every one of his answers says, “Yes, Lord; You know I do love You as my dear friend.” But it is as if he is admitting, I haven’t loved You at the highest possible level.

(Answer #2) - Peter's second answer is, "Yes, Lord; You know I love You." **21:16**

The construction is identical (Ναι, κυριε, συ οιδας οτι φιλω σε). Peter is again admitting the same thing. He does love the Lord and he wants the Lord to know that. The word "know" is one that means that the Lord has a mental awareness and information about his love.

(Answer #3) - Peter's third answer is, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." **21:17**

This time when Jesus asked the question, Peter was "grieved," which means he was greatly emotionally pained and distressed (Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 272). The passive tense of the verb indicates that God was the One who was causing this heavy grief to be on Peter. This third question really hit him hard.

There are some counselors today who think that the best thing they can do is put someone on medication so they won't be emotionally depressed or distraught. The fact is, sometimes being depressed or distraught is exactly what God wants so that one will honestly face things with Him. Some of these counselors are robbing people of a potential right relationship with God. Peter was distraught and that was exactly Christ's purpose.

Now the answer Peter gives is relatively the same as the other answers with the exception of two differences.

First, Peter acknowledges that Jesus knows (oida) all things and therefore he was not about to say that he loved Him at the highest possible level because he knew he had failed. The word he uses for "know" means to have mental information about all things. Peter says, Lord, you are God and you have mental knowledge of all things and You know I love You, maybe not at the highest level, but You know I love You.

Second, Peter changes the word "know" from oida (οιδα) to ginosko (γινωσκω), when he says, "You know that I love You." By this slight change in verbs Peter is saying, Lord, You have observed me and You have personally experienced the fact that I do love You. This is not just mental perception, I have been with You and You have experienced my love for You (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 92-93).

This is total, open, honest communication between Jesus Christ and Peter.

EXCHANGE #3 – Christ's commands to Peter. **21:15-17**

John Calvin made an interesting observation when he said one reason why Jesus first questions Peter's love before He gives him the assignment to "feed the sheep" is because nothing is more difficult in all the world and it will take a love for Jesus Christ to keep you going. As Calvin said, "No man...will steadily persevere in the discharge of this office, unless the love of Christ shall reign in his heart..." (*John*, Vol. 18, p. 288). It is much easier to not feed the sheep, but to entertain them or let them do what they want. But that is not what God calls the minister to do.

Apparently the vast majority of churches and ministers have missed what Jesus commands Peter to do here. **Jesus does not command Peter to find His sheep, He commands him to feed His sheep.** Most churches have completely missed this point and they think it is their job to make church as entertaining as they possibly can in hopes of finding some sheep who wander in because they are being entertained. **The ministry of the Church is not to be primarily a ministry of finding sheep, but feeding sheep.** If you miss this point, you can miss the will of God for the Church Age.

There are three commands Jesus gives to Peter; commands that every minister needs to think seriously about. **We may certainly observe that in all of the commands, the flock Peter is to tend is not his, it is God's.** These are Christ's sheep by creation and redemption. As we shall see, Peter is given a responsibility to remember it is God's flock, not his flock, not your flock or my flock; it is God's and **Peter's primary job is to feed it.**

There have been many "ministers" who have apparently missed this memo from God. Some have fleeced God's sheep out of their money; some have robbed God's sheep from understanding His truth; some have hurt God's sheep with their immorality; some have lied to God's sheep by their distortion of doctrine; some have killed God's sheep with their speech. One day all ministers will have their own "fireside chat" with Jesus Christ who said, "Feed My sheep."

(Command #1) - Jesus commands Peter to tend My lambs. 21:15

The word "tend" (βοσκω) is the Greek word for feed. This word was used for the responsibility a shepherd had to see to it that his flock was well-fed and grazing on nutritious food (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 84).

Now what I find extremely interesting here is that this is the same word that will be used again in **verse 17**, but the object of the verb will change from "lambs" to "sheep." The word "lamb" (αρνιον) refers to a little lamb and the word "sheep" (προβατον) refers to the older sheep. **Notice carefully what both groups need - not entertaining, but feeding.**

What Jesus is actually teaching Peter here is this - If you really love Me, then you must be about feeding My lambs and sheep the Word of God. Do you want to know when a minister really loves Jesus Christ? When he works very, very hard at feeding God's sheep from the Word of God.

There are many demands on a minister - he is supposed to be an administrator, a counselor, one who visits people and makes hospital calls. He is supposed to officiate at weddings and funerals and attend board meetings and mission meetings and lots of other meetings. **But what the minister must always remember is that his primary job description from God is to feed the sheep the Word of God.** Just as the primary job of an accountant is to decipher numbers; the primary job of a carpenter is to build; the primary job of a painter is to paint; the primary job of a truck driver is to drive; **the primary job of the minister is to preach the Word of God to the flock of God.**

(Command #2) - Jesus commands Peter to shepherd My sheep. **21:16**

The word for “shepherd” (ποιμαίνω) is one that means to act as a shepherd in governing and tending the flock. Do you want to know who the minister is who loves Jesus Christ? He will be one who is very concerned about governing a flock in the true, pure ways of God.

A shepherd who loves the Lord will be one who is not given to the emotional or irrational, but the Biblical. He will move the flock in the true ways of God. You may think that if the minister really loved you, he would let you do and think what you want. But that was not Jesus’ view at this meeting with Peter. The real issue was about loving Jesus Christ enough to govern His flock, His way.

(Command #3) - Jesus commands Peter to tend My sheep. **21:17**

Again, Jesus clearly shows the importance of feeding God’s people God’s Word.

Apparently the Apostle Peter never forgot about this special moment with Jesus Christ because years later, he challenged elders of a church to remember this exact same thing (I Peter 5:1-4).

Jesus views His people as lambs and sheep who need feeding and tending. The minister who loves Jesus Christ will be about this very type of work.

PARTING THOUGHTS:

- 1) If we are going to be greatly used by God, as Peter was, then we must face up to our own sin individually and personally. Sometimes humiliating rebukes are a necessary part of the process.
- 2) If we are going to be greatly used by God, as Peter was, we must always be willing to ask ourselves, do I really love Jesus Christ? Thomas Whitelaw said, “The grand qualification for service in Christ’s church is love to Christ’s person.”
- 3) If we are going to be greatly used by God, as Peter was, we will live our lives in a total awareness that we have a relationship with the God who knows all things. Nothing is hidden from God about us and wise is the servant who realizes this. God knows the worst about us, yet still wants a relationship with us and wants to use us.
- 4) It is the job of the minister to see to it that God’s flock is well fed and Biblically governed. Systematic preaching of O.T. and N.T. books is declining or nonexistent in most churches and also what is declining is a flock that is well-fed. It is still the minister’s job to feed God’s flock His Word and woe to one who doesn’t.
- 5) When you go to church, you should do so with an expectancy that I am going to feed on the Word of God that can nourish my soul and make me healthy.