

Do You Truly Love Me?

John 21:15-17

Joe Garagiola, former major league catcher, tells of a time when Stan Musial, a super hitter at the peak of his career, came to the plate. The pitcher was young and nervous. Garagiola called for a fastball. The pitcher shook his head. Joe signaled for a few other pitches including one of the pitcher's specialties. Still, the pitcher shook his head. So Joe went out to the mound for a conference. He said, "I've called for every pitch in the book; what do you want to throw?"

"Nothing," came the shaky reply. "I just want to hold on to the ball as long as I can."

Do you have tendencies toward avoidance? Might such a tendency of Peter have prompted the story of his encounter with Jesus that was just read to us? Jesus' death, burial and resurrection have already occurred as this scene unfolds. He first appeared to His disciples in Jerusalem, but now they have returned home to Galilee to resume their lives, several as fishermen. Eventually, Jesus will tell them to return to Jerusalem and to wait until they receive power from heaven. He is speaking of the descent of the Holy Spirit and the birth of His church. In the meantime, it must have been exhilarating just to have Jesus back for this day at the beach. But, something had happened with Peter the night Jesus was arrested, something that had not yet been addressed.

Before Jesus was arrested, Peter had been the loudest of the group when it came to boasting about "being there" for Him. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus first disclosed the horror of the cross that He would endure. Peter rebuked Him: "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16: 22). At the Last Supper, when Jesus told Peter that he would disown him, Peter insisted, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (Mark 14:31). Apparently, whatever was pulsing through Peter's veins quickly ran its course that night after Jesus was arrested. Before dawn, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus, much less that he was with Him. Peter even resorted to cursing and swearing to make his denial more compelling.

Now, Jesus was alive again, but the Holy Spirit had not yet made the meaning of the great events of the gospel clear – why Jesus died and what His resurrection meant. The Apostles were as dazed and confused as ever, maybe more so. But at least Jesus was not dead, so Peter may have felt that the floodlight of scrutiny on his own horrible debacle had been turned off. Here is where Peter's desire for avoidance might have kicked in. His sin didn't need to be dragged out and addressed. Funny, that's how many of us like to deal with our sins. Sure, we stumble from time to time, but there's no reason to obsess. The past is past. What is guilt good for anyway?

A child may do something in one setting that is best addressed later, in a more appropriate setting; like the ominous "when we get home." The parent can tell that he clearly prefers that things be left unsaid. He's more responsive when he's called. His room is neater. Things get picked up without asking. He's in and out of the shower and into bed without being reminded. I think there was something childishly irresponsible in Peter that preferred that he and Jesus might just move forward without rehashing that whole unfortunate three-fold denial episode.

That fits nicely into our culture's aversion to guilt. Let's move on and put all that unpleasantness behind us. But, what is depicted on the shore of Galilee is a "one-on-one encounter" that made Peter terribly uncomfortable. Jesus questioned his love and it hurt – not because Peter's love was so genuine and unshakable, but because Peter knew that it was not. Peter's guilt left him squirming.

In our text, we will see that Peter cannot answer Jesus' question precisely as it was asked. This encounter compelled Peter to dredge up issues that he would have preferred to leave buried in the field of denial, but how else could he be sure that he would not repeat his mistake later. The Resurrection had provided a thrilling reprieve, but Jesus still had unfinished business with Peter.

I. A Convicting Question

A. Jesus' Question Forces Self-examination

Peter wept after he denied Jesus, but things happened quickly after that and he had little occasion to reflect on his sin. This was the disciple who so forcefully proclaimed to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But, after Jesus' arrest, what the chief priests had in mind was more than Peter could accept. How could *messiah* (or, the Christ) die? Now, far from professing his belief that Jesus was the Christ, Peter buckled when asked if he even knew Jesus.

Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. This three-fold, failed opportunity merited a three-fold challenge to Peter's loyalty of which he had so confidently boasted. Jesus' query, "Do you truly love me?" forced Peter to face himself. If anyone asks us if we love Jesus, it is typically in a cozy setting where we can answer, "Amen, brother." But, who would ask anyone in the aftermath of his sin, "Do you truly love Jesus?" That's piling on guilt, kicking a guy when he's down. Pop psychologists cringe, but Jesus appears not to mind if Peter feels ashamed, at least, for a season.

Is Jesus really heaping guilt on Peter? No, Jesus is simply causing Peter to confront the guilt that is already there. People instinctively suppress guilt. I think there are times when Christian friendship and shepherding demand disallowing that. "Do you truly love me?" As Peter thinks about this question, he knows too well that his love for Jesus has *NOT* always prevailed, and he dares not boast that it has. Peter gives the same answer to Jesus three times, but that answer does not reflect what Jesus is asking the first two times when He asks Peter, "Do you *truly* love me?" We will explore the precise language behind that assertion in a few moments.

We should examine our own love for Jesus in the aftermath of our sins. We don't like guilt. We would create a guilt-free world if we could, but self-examination ought to follow sin. Authentic repentance requires it. Jesus will remove our guilt and shame as surely as He would remove Peter's, but that's His job, not ours. Whenever we try to remove our own guilt, or we give aid and comfort to another who is trying to remove his own guilt, we are not removing the guilt at all, but simply denying and burying it. In the process, we nurture hearts that become hard, cold and indifferent to the heinousness of our sin and to the holiness of God Himself.

B. We Stand Not Because We Truly Love Jesus, but Because He Truly Loved Us

We have much cause for asking ourselves; "Do I truly love Jesus?" Just focus on the last week. Did anything happen at work that might cast a cloud of doubt upon the authenticity of your love for Jesus? Could an angry word or a bitter spirit have placed your love for Jesus in question? Did some circumstance find you less than grateful to God? And, if you managed to make it through the past week without any such scandal of committed sins, then, how have you done in the area of omitted sins? Have you given Jesus the time one whom you truly love warrants? Have you longed after His fellowship just "...as the deer panteth for the water" as we so often sing?

Each of us has sinned enough this week to warrant some self-suspicion as to how “truly” we love Jesus. To insist that your love for Him is above such scrutiny would be the same kind of self-delusion as boasting that you do not sin. It would be the same as Peter looking Jesus squarely in the eye and claiming, “My love has never failed you, Jesus.” Jesus makes provision for our sins and the imperfect love they expose, but true repentance compels us to face those realities.

Perfect love was only manifested in human flesh one time: “This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). The only reasonable response to a God Who has loved us perfectly is to endeavor to love Him perfectly. We will fail in that endeavor and we will do so often and grievously, but that does not sully the love He has for us. We love God because He first loved us, but our love is imperfect, no matter how lofty our boasts can sound. God’s love to us is perfect, and that perfect love is the only reason we have life in Christ.

II. A Cautious Response

A. Peter Does Not Immediately Answer Jesus’ Question as It Is Framed

Almost certainly, Jesus and Peter conversed in Aramaic, but when John recorded the event in Greek, in order to communicate the spirit of the exchange, He selected two distinct Greek words for “love” and he used them strategically. The first two times Jesus asked, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me ...?” John used that great word for love, *agapao*, (we call it *Agape*).

Originally, a giving love, or charity, *agapao* was appropriated by the early Christians to describe the highest expression of love. In the New Testament, it describes God’s love for man. It came to mean perfect, selfless and sacrificial love. But as Peter answers Jesus, all he can bring himself to say is: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” For Peter’s responses, John uses *phileo*, which describes the tender and affectionate love one might feel for family or for a very close friend.

The *New International Version* distinguishes the two words by supplying the adverb “truly” when *agapao* is used. Peter does love Jesus, but he cannot bring himself to claim that he loves Jesus as Jesus desires for him to, without deviation, as Jesus loves him. Peter’s awareness of his flawed devotion is why he cannot answer precisely the same way Jesus asks the question.

The first question was, “Do you truly love me more than these?” Technically, the question is ambiguous. Jesus could have meant, “Do you love me more than these things?” meaning the trappings of life as a fisherman – the boats, the nets, the open sea. He may have meant, “Do you love me more than you love these other disciples?” But, considering earlier boasts, Jesus may have meant, “Simon, do you love me more than these other disciples love me?” After all, on at least one occasion, Peter boasted that his love for Jesus was greater than that of his fellow-disciples: “Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will!’” (Matthew 26:33). Now, Peter could no longer claim that his love was greater than anyone else’s.

At the very moment Peter was denying Jesus, the Lord was being led by His captors from the high priest's house. Their eyes met, and Jesus looked intently into Peter's face (Luke 22:61). That had to be painful, but also memorable. Jesus knew what Peter had done, and Peter knew that Jesus knew. Peter may have been less than enthused when beckoned for this little stroll on the beach. He may have cringed when asked, "*Simon son of John, do you truly love me?*"

Before the denial, Peter would have answered this question without even thinking about it. We certainly tend to over-assess our own love for Jesus when we fail to examine our sins and failures. Such foolish over-assessment of our love becomes a breeding ground for many problems in the church. If we believe others love the Lord less than we do, we cannot help but to attribute bad motives to their ideas. Suspicion and distrust abound. We become inflexible when others disagree with us. We pity ourselves when we are questioned. After all, we love Jesus, more than any of these.

A second time, Jesus asked, "*Simon do you truly love me?*" (again, *agapao*). Again, Peter only answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you (*phileo*)." In earlier days, Peter might have popped off. "I would go to prison and to death with you. I love you more than anybody I know." But this was a new Peter, one painfully aware of his weaknesses. "Lord, you know I love you, but don't make me swear that I love you perfectly. We both know better." This new Peter understood guilt, shame and failure, and he knew that he was not sufficient in and of himself.

Did Jesus put Peter through too much? No, this was the same Peter who would lead the early church. This was the same Peter who would wield the keys of Christ's kingdom, preaching the gospel on Pentecost, when God poured His Spirit out on the Jews and later, preaching the gospel in the home of Cornelius, when God sent His Spirit on the Gentiles. God had plans to use Peter mightily, but first He desired to break Peter of Peter-reliance so as to teach him Jesus-reliance.

B. Ultimately, Jesus Accepted that Love Peter Could Promise

Jesus asked a third time, "*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*" This time, Jesus used *phileo*. For now, He set aside the idea of perfect love (*agapao*) and asked only for the love Peter will promise. This hurt Peter, for it was as though Jesus was asking, "Okay, I'll drop that idea of perfect, unshakable love for now, but can you really give me the love you promise?" Will you really give it your best? Peter answered, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

I don't think that Jesus was disappointed at all that Peter would not promise to love Him perfectly. I think He would have been more distressed had Peter worded yet one more boast that he knew he could not back up. Peter promised Jesus all the affection, loyalty and friendship of which he was capable, but he dared not promise to love Jesus flawlessly. He had popped off too many times in the past only to shame himself. Peter was humbled. He knew that he was not capable of true love. True love for God should be the supreme goal for every believer, but in the final analysis, only God Himself can bring us to a point of perfect love. In the meantime, Jesus asks for the best that we have to give, not more than He knows that we can give. He does not exactly meet us where we are. He calls us to step up without demanding the impossible of us.

III. A Convincing Obedience

A. Peter's Proof of His Love for Jesus Would Be to Feed His Sheep

Three times, Jesus responded to Peter's profession of love with an instruction to prove that profession by caring for His people. He says in verse 15, "Feed (or pasture) my lambs"; in verse 16, "Take care of (or shepherd) my sheep"; and again in verse 17, "Feed my sheep." I don't know that the distinctions in the three commands are as telling as the fact that Jesus establishes Peter as an "undershepherd" of Himself. The lambs, after all, are Jesus' lambs, His people. That should be a sobering realization for anyone called to shepherd God's sheep in any capacity. This challenge demanded a total renewal of Peter's loyalty. No doubt, he recalled this day at the beach and his promise to love Jesus through caring when years later he wrote other shepherds:

¹To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed; ²Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.. - 1 Peter 5:1-3

Elders, parents and those others among you who are responsible for teaching and nurturing and correcting others, do you love Jesus? The best evidence you can produce is to love God's people and to lead them as He would lead them. The only means to accomplish this is to know His heart and mind and to guide others accordingly. And to the flock of God, do you also realize that to honor your leaders, to humbly follow their guidance and to understand their burden for you are likewise the most practical way that you can give integrity to your claims that you love Jesus.

B. The Final Proof of Our Love for Jesus Is Our Love for His Own

To feed Jesus' lambs is the demonstration of love required of Peter and of others called to lead the Body of Christ. Of course, not every believer is called to be a shepherd, an elder or a teacher. But, those who are called to such equipping roles are to affect the capacity of all believers to prove their love to Jesus through caring for one another. The reason equippers are called is:

"... to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." - Ephesians 4:12, 13

Jesus desires to bring every believer into His fullness, into maturity, into perfect love. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that if any believer wishes to authenticate his or her professed love for Jesus now, he or she will obey Jesus by working to build up all God's people. Prove your love for Jesus by doing whatever God has equipped you to do in building up others. He gave Himself for you; give yourselves to Him. Do you love Him? Love demands nothing less.