

## DO YOU LOVE ME? - JOHN 21:15-22

### Interview with Jesus #7

John Albrecht was a pastor of the Episcopal Church over in Lake Orion, Michigan. As he was preparing for his sermon one Sunday, he decided to shock his congregation with a brief but powerful sermon. When the time came for the message, Pastor Albrecht stood from his chair, walked slowly over to the pulpit, looked at his congregation and said, *Love*. He then walked back to his seat and sat down. The Guinness Book of World Records has this sermon listed as the shortest sermon ever delivered. As he was greeting members at the door following the worship service, several remarked that it was the best sermon that he had ever preached.

Love. It's just a 4 letter word. But in some ways it is a most powerful message.

It's interesting to note the prominence of love during the latter part of the Lord Jesus Christ's public ministry here on this earth. During that final meeting that Jesus had with his disciples on the eve of his betrayal when they met in the upper room and broke bread together, John records Jesus uttering the word *love* no fewer than 15 times. Then Jesus exemplified the greatest demonstration of love ever by voluntarily giving his life as a sacrifice for sin so that we might receive God's forgiveness and be born again into his divine family.

And then after his resurrection from the tomb, one of the final scenes in Jesus' earthly ministry was an intimate time of sharing words of love with the leader of his band of disciples. Jesus had become family with the 12 disciples who had given up everything to follow him. They had lived together for 3 years. They had walked together hundreds of miles down dusty roads talking about everything imaginable; they had eaten several thousand meals together; they had heard each other snore at night as they tried to get to sleep. But there had just been a major rift that had developed between the disciples and their teacher. In his greatest hour of need, while Jesus had been expressing his love for them, the disciples had all deserted him. Peter, the leader, had even denied Christ publicly. There were feelings of inadequacy and failure that threatened to permanently injure the relationship that they once had together.

Listen to these verses recorded by Luke that chronicle the progression of this rift that had developed between Peter and Christ.

*Luke 22:31-34*

<sup>31</sup> *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. <sup>32</sup> But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*

<sup>33</sup> *But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."*

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

Luke 22:54-62

<sup>54</sup> Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. <sup>55</sup> But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. <sup>56</sup> A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

<sup>57</sup> But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

<sup>58</sup> A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

<sup>59</sup> About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

<sup>60</sup> Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. <sup>61</sup> The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." <sup>62</sup> And he went outside and wept bitterly.

We can only imagine the feelings that Peter experienced as he caught the eyes of Jesus across the courtyard after he had denied knowing him and cursed his name. And he would not see Jesus again. Jesus would be lead away to the execution hill called Calvary. The next that Peter would hear, Jesus would be dead. How Peter must have regretted that brief lapse in loyalty. Now he would have to live with that failure the rest of his life.

But Jesus wasn't about to let that happen. No, after he rose from the dead, the Bible tells us that he made a special resurrection appearance to Peter alone. We don't know any details of that appearance, but it must have been a very special time. And now, just before his ascension back into heaven, Jesus and Peter express words of love for each other. – expressing love for the very last time before Jesus would return to His Father in heaven.

Notice this interview that Jesus initiated with Peter found in John 21:15-17:

*JN 21:15* When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

*JN 21:16* Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

*JN 21:17 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."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

Because the New Testament was originally written in the Greek language, we sometimes miss some nuances in our English translations. We are blessed to have many good English translations of the Bible. The King James Translation, the American Standard Translation, the New International Version and many others are excellent translations that accurately give the message that God intended to give through his word. But there are times when small nuances can be missed in our English translations - and in John 21, we find one of those cases.

Whereas we have 1 basic word for love, the Greeks had 2 major words that were used in the New Testament.

\*agapao is used of a love that unconditionally recognizes value in something and causes one to sacrifice for that object that is so highly esteemed. The quality of agapao love is determined by the character of the one who loves. It is agapao love that is found in John 3:16 where the Bible tells us *that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.* God considered the human race to be of such value to him that he was willing to sacrifice unconditionally for their benefit.

\*There is another common Greek term for love in the New Testament. It is phileo. Phileo love is the response of the human heart to that which brings pleasure to it. Human beings naturally enjoy pleasurable things and experiences. When we anticipate that something or someone is going to bring pleasure to us, we have a tendency to love. This is phileo love that is more concerned with our experience of pleasure than it is with the object that is valued. And even today, we recognize this Greek term in some of our English words. A philanthropist is one who derives great pleasure in helping his fellow man. A philanderer is one who has many affairs because of the pleasure that it gives to him.

Kenneth Wuest, the Greek scholar, contrasts these 2 words in this way: *Agapao is a love springing from a sense of the preciousness of the object loved, while phileo arises from a sense of pleasure found in the object loved. When used in a good meaning, both are legitimate, but the first is a nobler word.*

Now I give this background only to better understand this passage in John 21 better. Without it, we can easily become confused with why Jesus keeps pressing his question to Peter *do you love me*, and why Peter becomes so hurt near the end of this interview.

When Jesus asks Peter the first time *do you truly love me* he uses the word Agapao - Peter do you recognize my value so highly that you unconditionally are willing to sacrifice all for me? Peter responds by

saying *you know that I love you* using the term phileo. Yes Lord, the relationship that we have with each other brings great pleasure to me. To Peter's credit, he answered honestly. By this time he realized that he couldn't hide anything from the Lord anyway. How could he say that he loved Christ with an agapao love valuing him higher than anything else in the world when he had just denied him? But you can see that he really didn't answer Jesus question.

So Jesus continued. *Simon, son of John, do you truly love me* in an agapao way - recognizing my value so highly that you are willing to unconditionally sacrifice all for me. Peter responded again, *Yes Lord, you know that I love you*, but again Peter used the term Phileo - the relationship that we have brings me great pleasure and I value it very highly. But again, Peter really didn't answer what Jesus was asking.

So Jesus came once again the third time. *Simon, son of John, do you love me* - and this time Jesus changed and used phileo as his word for love. Do you really value our relationship so highly? Does this relationship that we have developed over these past 3 years really even give you that much pleasure? And it was at this time that the Bible says Peter became hurt. And he answered *Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you* - with a phileo quality of love. You see, Peter knew the Lord Jesus Christ could look right into his heart. He couldn't hide anything from the Lord. So he wouldn't even pretend to love Christ with an agapao quality of love. How could he say that he loved Christ with the same quality of love that the Lord Jesus had just displayed by giving himself as the sin sacrifice for the human race because he valued people so highly? But he knew that he loved Jesus and valued his relationship with him very highly. He knew of the pleasure that his relationship with Christ brought to him. How could Jesus question that? I don't believe that Jesus really did question it - for he could see that quality of love in the heart of Peter. But Jesus just wanted to hear Peter say it. Jesus wanted to hear Peter answer his question and say that he loved him.

One of the most heart-searching questions that any person can ask himself is *Do I really love God?* Most of us would admit with Peter that we really don't usually love God with an agapao love - we usually don't love God with that pure, altruistic love that values him so highly because of whom he is that we unconditionally give everything that we have to him every moment of the day, every day of our lives. But do we even love God with a phileo love? Is our relationship with God so precious to us that it brings continuous pleasure to our souls?

In this passage, Jesus gives 3 evidences of love for him. We don't have much time to develop them, but let me just invite you to note them with me briefly.

### 3 PRACTICAL WAYS TO SHOW LOVE FOR GOD:

1. The first evidence of our love for the Lord is FEEDING GOD'S SHEEP. You noted that in each case

after Peter answered Jesus question of whether or not he loved him, Jesus responded by saying, *Feed my Lambs; Take care of my sheep; Feed my sheep.*

One of the evidences of true love is that if we really love someone, we are lead to value what that person values. As most of you know, my wife, Sandy, grew up in Japan. It should not be surprising that she really likes oriental food. When we first got married, I couldn't stand oriental food. My mother never cooked oriental food. My only experience with it had been the dry Chinese chow mein in the college cafeteria which was arguably the worst meal that they ever cooked there. But because Sandy loved oriental food so much, we would sometimes go out to a Chinese or Japanese restaurant to eat or order some Chinese takeout. Now, after 36 years of marriage, I can honestly say that sweet and sour chicken is one of my favorite meals. It probably never would have been except for my relationship with my wife. As we grew in our relationship together, I began to love some of the things that she loved.

God loves people. We can't even begin to imagine how much He loves the pinnacle of His creation. God created the human race in his own likeness and image. God loves people so much that He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for them. God gave that which was most precious to Him so that His relationship with people could be restored. As we grow in our relationship with Him, one of the evidences of our love for him will be our concern for others. As we feed God's sheep, as we take care of others who have been created in God's likeness and image, we are demonstrating our love for God himself.

2. A second evidence of our love for God is being willing to GLORIFY GOD IN OUR DEATH. READ 21:18,19a

<sup>18</sup> *I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.* <sup>19</sup> *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.*

We know from history that the Apostle Peter would end his life in a similar way to how Jesus ended his. It was during the reign of the wicked Roman Emperor named Nero that Simon Peter was crucified. He would stretch out his hands and have then nailed to a cross and would be led where he would not have chosen to go just as Jesus predicted. To Peter's credit, his death was a tremendous testimony to God. At his request according to tradition, Peter was actually crucified upside down with his head towards the ground because he said that he was not worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ was. Many were moved by Peter's death. He certainly did glorify God in his death.

But Peter glorified God by his death thousands of times before he was crucified on that cross. For it is sometimes easier to think of that climatic exodus from this earth and the testimony that can be given for the

Lord through some poignant last words than it is to think of a consistent testimony for the Lord while living on this earth. Sometimes it is easier to think of dying for the Lord than living for him. But Christ had taught his disciples that the life of faith was a crucified life - and Peter knew that very well. Jesus had taught Peter many times that the one who would truly be His disciple must be willing to take up his cross daily. Dying to self and choosing to serve on a daily basis was the key to a life that would glorify God. It would be only as one lived the crucified life that he would be confident in facing death to the glory of God. And we know that Peter heard this message clearly and put it into practice in his life. We don't have time to hear many passages from Peter's own words how Christ's statement impacted his life, but let me just read 2 briefly.

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 1 Pet. 1:21*

*Be 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. 1 Pet. 5:2*

3. But let's conclude with a 3rd evidence of our love for the Lord. If we truly love the Lord, we will FOLLOW THE LORD WITHOUT COMPARING OURSELVES TO OTHER CHRISTIANS.

<sup>20</sup> *Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?")* <sup>21</sup> *When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"*

<sup>22</sup> *Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."*

Now we can understand that Peter was probably getting a bit self-conscious by this time. After all, Jesus had been focusing pretty heavily on him. And it must have been uncomfortable for him, especially after the embarrassment of his denial. For each denial, he had been asked to confess his love for the Lord. And Peter understandably tries to divert attention from himself by pointing to John. John was the one who had leaned on Jesus during the last supper. He didn't want to give his name because he was the one who was writing all this down as an eye witness and author of the book. But Jesus didn't let Peter get away with this attempt to escape scrutiny, did he? He gently tells Peter to get his eyes off John. Peter's response to the Lord is all that is important. *You must Follow Me* Jesus says to Peter.

It is so easy to compare ourselves with others around us. *I'm a better Christian in my life than he is. I give more time in service for the Lord than she does. I'll bet my yearend financial statement from the church is higher than theirs is.* But if we are doing what we are doing for the Lord so that we can keep up with or beat the Jones', then are we really evidencing love for God or are we evidencing love for ourselves and our

own reputations? Jesus instructed Peter to get his eyes off of John and to concentrate on his own walk with the Lord.

I don't doubt that all of us here in this sanctuary have a love for God. That is what has brought us together this morning. People who don't love God don't go to church on Sunday. But it would be beneficial to each of us to examine the quality of our love for the Lord. And it is helpful in doing this to examine the evidences of our love for God.

\*Are we growing in our love for what God loves? Is our love for people growing? Are we finding ourselves more and more concerned for what God loves?

\*Are we concerned to take up our cross and follow Christ on a daily basis? Are we willing to even glorify God in death if that's what He would ask of us?

\* Do we rejoice when God is glorified through the service of others or do we find ourselves being secretly envious, evidencing that we are comparing ourselves in our hearts with them?

\*Is following the Lord Jesus Christ and giving Him His rightful place in our lives the most important thing in life to us?