

Simon Peter, Do You Love Me?

Scripture: John 21

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So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” 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.” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.”
(21:15–17)

The primary mark of the redeemed has always been love for God. The Shema, the great Old Testament confession of faith, declares, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). Later in Deuteronomy Moses exhorted Israel to manifest that love by obeying God’s commandments (10:12–13; 11:1). When Daniel poured out his heart in prayer for his people, he addressed God as “the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Dan. 9:4). After the exile Nehemiah echoed Daniel’s prayer: “I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Neh. 1:5). The theme of loving God was also on the heart of David, who wrote, “I love You, O Lord, my strength” (Ps. 18:1).

The New Testament also teaches that love is the mark of a true believer. When asked to name the greatest commandment of the law, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). In 1 Corinthians 8:3 Paul wrote, “If anyone loves God, he is known by Him.” On the other hand the apostle warned, “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22). Only those who love God receive eternal life (James 1:12) and inherit the kingdom (James 2:5). Peter wrote in his first epistle, “Though you have not seen Him [Christ], you love Him” (1 Peter 1:8). Love is also the driving, compelling force that motivates Christian service (2 Cor. 5:14).

Peter learned the hard way what it means to love Jesus Christ. He had vociferously declared his unflinching devotion to Him more than once. At the Last Supper, “Simon Peter said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, where are You going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.’ Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You’”

(John 13:36–37). A short while later he boldly proclaimed, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (Matt. 26:33). Yet when the chips were down, Peter’s self-confessed love failed and he openly denied three times that he even knew Jesus. His vaunted courage proved to be nothing but empty talk when facing a threatening situation.

Peter’s failure highlights the biblical truth that obedience is the essential evidence of genuine love. In John 14:15 Jesus put it plainly: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” In verse 21 He added, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me” (cf. 15:10). In 1 John 5:3 John echoed the Lord’s teaching: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome,” while in his second epistle he added, “And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it” (2 John 6).

Jesus knew that if Peter was to play the crucial role in the early church that He had chosen him for, he would need to be restored. Peter needed to understand that although he had forsaken Christ, Christ had not forsaken him (cf. Rom. 8:31–39). The Lord had evidently already appeared to Peter privately (Luke 24:34; cf. 1 Cor. 15:5), but Scripture does not record any details of that meeting. Whatever may have happened in Peter’s personal encounter with the risen Lord, since his denials were public knowledge, he needed to be publicly restored. The other disciples needed to hear Peter’s reaffirmation of his love for Christ and Christ’s recommissioning of him, so they would be willing to loyally support his leadership.

As soon as they **had finished breakfast** (cf. 21:12–13), Jesus initiated the restoration by confronting Peter. That He addressed him as “**Simon, son of John**” suggests that what followed was a rebuke. Jesus had given Simon the nickname “Peter” (John 1:42), but sometimes referred to him as “Simon” when Peter did something that needed rebuke or correction (e.g., Matt. 17:25; Mark 14:37; Luke 22:31). It was as if our Lord called him by his former name when he was acting like his former self. The Lord’s pointed question, “**Do you love Me more than these** (i.e., the boat, nets, and other fishing paraphernalia)?” went right to the heart of the issue. As noted in the previous chapter of this volume, Peter, impatient at Jesus’ delay in meeting the disciples and beleaguered by his own failures, had impulsively decided to return to being a fisherman (21:3). That he was sure he could do well—or so he had thought. But Jesus confronted Peter and called him to follow Him and be the fisher of men he was first called to be (Matt. 4:19). “No servant can serve [be a slave to] two masters,” He had previously told them, “for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 16:13). Jesus challenged Peter to permanently abandon his former life and be exclusively devoted to following Him, based on his love.

Peter replied **to Him**, “**Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.**” There is an interesting wordplay in the Greek text. The word Jesus used for **love** is *agapao*, the highest love of the will, love that implies

total commitment (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4–8). Peter, painfully aware of his disobedience and failure, felt too guilty to claim that type of love. The brash pronouncements were a thing of the past; broken and humbled and fully aware that his action precluded him from a believable claim to the highest love, Peter answered by using the word *phileo*, a less lofty term that signifies affection. He also appealed to Jesus' omniscience, reminding Him, **“You know that I love You.”**

Accepting Peter's humble acknowledgement that his love was less than he had claimed and Christ deserved, Jesus still recommissioned him, graciously saying to him, **“Tend My lambs.”** **Tend** translates a form of the verb *bosko*, a term used of herdsmen pasturing and feeding their livestock. The present tense of the verb denotes continuous action. In keeping with the metaphor He introduced in 10:7–16 (cf. Pss. 95:7; 100:3; Ezek. 34:31), Jesus described believers as His **lambs**, emphasizing not only their immaturity, vulnerability, and need, but also that they are His (cf. Matt. 18:5–10). It is the same responsibility given to every pastor, as Paul pointed out in Acts 20:28 and as Peter himself exhorted in 1 Peter 5:2. Paul instructed the young pastor Timothy that the means to doing this was to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Continuing to reinforce His point on the supremacy of love as the motive to faithfulness, Jesus **said to Peter again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”** Once again He used the verb *agapao*, and once again Peter was unwilling to use that word; in his reply, **“Yes, Lord; You know that I love You,”** Peter again used the verb *phileo*. The Lord then charged him, **“Shepherd My sheep.”** Jesus chose a different term than the one translated “tend” in verse 15. This word, a form of the verb *poimaino*, is likely a synonym for the previous verb, both of which are suitable to express the full scope of responsibility that pastoral oversight entails (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

But Jesus still was not through with Peter, so **He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”** **Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”** The reason for Peter's grief was a change in the Lord's vocabulary. Unlike His two previous questions, this third time Jesus used Peter's word for love, *phileo*. He called into question even the less than total devotion Peter thought he was safe in claiming. The implication that his life did not support even that level of love broke Peter's heart. All he could do was appeal even more strongly to Jesus' omniscience, saying **to Him, “Lord, You know all things** (cf. 2:24–25; 16:30); **You know that I love You.”** For the third time Jesus accepted the apostle's recognized failure and imperfection (cf. Isa. 6:1–8) and graciously charged Peter to care for His flock, saying **to him, “Tend My sheep.”** Peter's restoration was thus complete. As Andreas Köstenberger notes,

Perhaps at long last Peter has learned that he cannot follow Jesus in his own strength and has realized the hollowness of affirming his own loyalty in a way that relies more on his own power of will than on Jesus' enablement.... Likewise, we should soundly distrust self-serving pledges of loyalty today that betray self-reliance rather than a humble awareness of one's own limitations in acting on

one's best intentions [cf. 2 Cor. 12:9–10]. (*John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 598)

Peter remained obedient to the Lord's commission for the rest of his life. His ministry from that point forward involved not only proclaiming the gospel (Acts 2:14–40; 3:12–26), but also feeding the flock the Lord had entrusted to him (cf. Acts 2:42). Nearing the end of his ministry many years later, Peter wrote,

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1–3)

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