

John 21:15-17

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, "Feed my lambs." He said to him 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, "Tend 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 everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

If you remember from last weeks teaching, the disciples returned to Galilee and were hanging out at the sea of Tiberias. They were supposed to have been waiting for Jesus to show up but Peter got bored and decided to go fishing. Six other disciples joined him and they fished all night but caught nothing. At dawn Jesus shows up on the shore and calls out to them. He tells these disciples to throw their nets on the right side of the boat, which they did and to their surprise, they pulled in a huge catch of supernatural proportions. Recognizing that it was Jesus, Peter jumped in the water and swam to Him. The other disciples stayed in the boat and hauled the catch to the shore. Jesus already had a fire going and had cooked breakfast for them and when they arrived He invited them to eat.

When they had finished enjoying the breakfast which Jesus supernaturally provided, and they received their supernatural nutrients, Jesus engages Peter in a very powerful and heart-warming discussion—a discussion that Peter would never forget.

To understand the intensity that I believe was in this discussion we have to remember that this discussion comes on the heels of one of history's most famous acts of denial. In **Luke 24:34** we are told that Jesus appeared to Peter sometime before the upper-room appearance; however, we don't have an account of that appearance or any information as to whether Jesus said anything to Him or not. So, as far as we know, this is the first one-on-one discussion between the two of them after Peter's denials. And then Jesus starts off by referring to Peter not as "Peter" the name of affection which Jesus chose for him, but by his natural name: "Simon, the son of John." This was extremely intentional and highlights one of the important messages of this passage.

Accordingly, it's probably not too far of a jump to assume that Peter was gripped with the guilt and shame of his prior actions. Can you imagine after all Peter's boasting and proclamations—"Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" and "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You"—he totally folded and denied Jesus not once, not twice, but with cursing, three times. And now here He is face-to-face with the one He denied. I am sure Peter's mind was racing and was anxiously anticipating this moment. What is He going to say? Is He mad at me? Is He going to lower the boom or what? Is He going to embarrass me in front of the others? Am I going to be cut out—cut off?

Then in like manner to his 3 denials, 3 times Jesus addresses Peter; however, to the surprise of probably most everyone His topic is not failure or sin, but love. The first question was: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Now, the subtleties of this passage do not cross over very well into English for both the words "love" and "these" need some explanation.

As far as love, Jesus chose the verb form of “*agape*,” the word for God’s divine love. Peter, having at this time been born-again and filled with the Holy Spirit, now has the ability to love God with God’s love. In the past He had no ability to love with divine love; thus, his love, his commitment, his devotion, sincere affection, and well meaning intentions were simply not enough. In fact, Peter was always doomed to fail. For the love he had for Jesus was human love and was therefore, by definition, weak and plagued with all the self-seeking, self-preserving narcissistic tendencies that corrupt all of humanity.

But now, all things had been made new. He had the Spirit and he had access to God’s divine love, so it was entirely possible for Peter to let that love fill him and overwhelm him such that he could love Jesus more than he would love “these.” But Peter would have to choose to live either as Simon, son of John, or as Peter, to live in his *old sinful nature* or live in his *New Creation*. The choice was his.

“These” is an interesting word as it is a pronoun which allows for variant parsing which means that it has two potential meanings. It can be understood to be either masculine and refer to the others who were gathered with Peter or it can be neuter and refer to the fish, the boat, the sea, and his old way of life.

So it is entirely possible that Jesus might have been asking Peter if he loved Him more than he loved the guys that had become his family over the past 3-years. Jesus was soon going to be expanding the “family” and the numbers (like the catch of fish) were going to be overwhelming. Therefore, Jesus did not want Peter to just attach himself to those with whom he felt safe, secure, and loved. But he was going to have to live outside of his comfort zone and care for others. So this understanding is reasonable; however, there is nothing else in the overall context

of this story which would lead us to conclude that this was an issue Jesus was concerned with. More than likely, I think it was the later understanding.

Going back to throwing his net on the right side of the boat, I believe Jesus was asking Peter if he was willing to give it all up and exchange his old life for the life that Jesus had chosen for him. It was a relational question about trust, about faith, about surrender, about walking in the Spirit of God in the *New Creation*. "Do you love me more than the life that you thought you would have?" "Do you love me enough to trust that fishing is not how I want to provide for you and your family?" "Do you love me enough to trust that I will provide for you?" "Do you love me enough to choose to stay out of the boat, stay off the water, and leave all that is familiar on the shore?" "Do you love me enough to rely on my divine love and not the strength of your own capabilities?" "Do you love me enough to care for those who are precious to me?"

This question was another way of asking Peter if He would choose to identify himself as one who had been born-again of the Spirit of God, as one who is a child of God, as one whose life focus is to be all about loving Jesus with the divine love that only Jesus gives, and in so doing choose to no longer live as if he were a fisherman but a son of the living God. Jesus was asking Peter to choose to live from the *New Creation* and turn his back on the life which his flesh knew so well.

"Do you love me more than these?" "Feed my lambs." I want you to notice that Peter is commanded to feed the lambs (not sheep but lambs), which is clearly a metaphor for babes in the faith. Peter's future entailed training or discipling those who were young in their faith so that they could mature and become healthy sheep. And, while that is exciting and all, we must be careful to not put the cart

before the horse and take Jesus' words out of context. This is not intended to be understood as some stand-alone command for Peter to be about the work of the ministry. The contextual emphasis is on Peter's relationship with Jesus and God's divine love in Peter. In other words, feeding the lambs, giving young believers Jesus' words of life that would sustain their souls, was to be an overflow of God's love filling Peter.

It is very important that we do not take this command and create a duty, a law, a burden, or even a career choice out of "feeding the lambs." Jesus' instruction is to be understood as a relational expression or the fruit of having been filled with divine love and affection—an overflow of love from one relationship to another. In other words, if you trust yourself to Jesus, if you let Him occupy more and more of your heart, He will provide for you a well of His divine love from which you are able to choose to pour out His love on those who *need to know* why they can trust themselves to Jesus.

And the beautiful part of such a relational overflow is that caring for people is not a burden; for if His love fills you—if His life is in yours—then your desires will be His desires. Therefore, in the same way that Jesus said that His nourishment came from doing the will of God and from finishing His work (**John 4:34**), we will find that our nourishment, and continual supply of God's divine love, will come from doing the will of God and from finishing His work.

It is interesting that Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him (Jesus) with divine love; yet, Peter answered saying, yes I "love" you with strong affection and emotion. You see, in responding, Peter used the Greek word "*phileo*" which stands for human love, affection and emotion. As such, Peter's reply was entirely non-

responsive, even though he threw in a timely placed “Lord” just to give it the right spiritual spin.

Having been burned in the past with his claims of undying loyalty, the best he could now muster was, “yes, I *“phileo”* you.” We can’t be too hard on Peter; keep in mind, being born-again is an entirely new experience and neither he nor any of the other disciples have yet understood all that Jesus had taught them about living in the *New Creation*. It is pretty clear that Peter had no idea that he had already been given everything he would need for life and godliness. In fact, it would take a releasing of unbelievable power in their lives, on the day of Pentecost, for any of the disciples to begin to understand what Jesus had done for them when He breathed on them and they were filled with the Spirit. Years later, Peter would write to us and explain this truth (**2 Peter 1**), but sitting there at the shores of the Sea of Galilee he was just beginning his journey and he had a lot to learn about letting Jesus live through him.

Understand, however, that by even implying 1) that Peter could love Jesus with divine love, and 2) that he had the capacity to love in this manner, would mean that the divine One had imparted himself into Peter and had made him new, made him holy, and made him righteous. As such, it was entirely possible for Peter to love in this way (even if right now he did not understand that to be true). Divine love can only be produced by the Divine. It belongs exclusively to God, it comes from God, and it comes with God; and the only reason we can love with His love is because He lives in us. We are just the vessels through which He chooses to express His divine love.

Now the next couple of points are very critical to our understanding of the beauty of the whole passage. Even though Peter replied by saying, yes I “*phileo*” you and did not identify himself as having the ability to love with divine love, Jesus still implored him to feed the lambs. Jesus did not push back and say, “um, excuse me, didn’t you mean to use “*agape*.” No! There was no correction, no chastisement, no expression of disappointment, or requirement that he fixes his theological and practical understanding of the truth before he was qualified to care for Jesus’ lambs. Jesus just told Peter to feed His lambs and this charge was not dependent upon Peter getting anything right.

This is marvelous; please don’t miss it. Jesus did not address or even consider the failings of Peter’s flesh—his past denials, his refusal to wait for Jesus and instead go fishing, his present non-responsiveness to the questions Jesus asked, or even his failure to comprehend the truth? Jesus just moves forward and deals with Peter based on whom He has made him. He deals with Peter’s *New Creation*.

That is why I think it is a mistake to treat this passage, as it so often is, as the restoration of Peter. That is simply not what is happening here. Peter is not being restored to anything or anyone; he was restored—perfectly reconciled to God—when he was born-again and Jesus breathed into him the Holy Spirit. In fact, that is when all the disciples were restored and, according to **Romans 5:1**, were made to be at perfect peace with God. That is when the old things passed away and all was made new. Jesus is simply helping Peter **believe** it to be true and understand how He views him so Peter can choose to live in the new life he now possesses.

Please understand that this is exactly how Jesus deals with us in our failings. He knows that because we are in these bodies of flesh, and still have an *old sinful*

nature, that we will fail; it's therefore no surprise to Him when we blow it. But He is not interested in our *old sinful nature* or what we call our flesh. In fact, He will have nothing to do with it, for it is an enemy of God and always stands in opposition to Him (**Romans 8:4-11; James 4:4**). He is interested in teaching us how to live from our *New Creation* and be the men and women that He has chosen us to be. Therefore, He never deals with us on the basis of our sin but on who we are in Him and His desire for us to remain in ongoing fellowship with Him.

You see true Biblical obedience is not about “not sinning.” It is not about “not blowing it,” and it is not about “doing it right.” It really never has been. True Biblical obedience has always been about the obedience of belief. Remember, Abraham was declared righteous just for believing, before he did anything at all (**Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3**). From the beginning, God has wanted us to trust ourselves to Him, all the while refusing to believe the lies with which our *old sinful nature* is constantly barraging us, and choose instead to believe the truth about God's character, nature and His love for us. Remember **John 6:29**: the work of God is that we might believe in Jesus—believe that He is our Christ (**John 20:31**).

If we believe, He will take care of the rest. He will literally occupy more and more space in our hearts (**Ephesians 3:17**); and with Him comes peace, joy and His divine love for He is peace, joy and love. Thus, as we trust Him we will find that we love what He loves and that we will do only what He wants us to do—and since He loves the lambs, so will we. In fact, He will feed His lambs through us and we will merely be the privileged vessels through which He chooses to love them.

This reminds me of what Jesus explained in **John 14:21**. Those whom we find obeying His commandment to love others with His divine love are the ones who

have, or possess, divine love for Him; which can only mean one thing. They are the ones who have believed that He is their Christ and have trusted themselves to Him in both the practical and deeply intimate areas of their life. Thus, His divine love always precedes His divine appointments for our lives.

Jesus then said to Peter 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, "Tend my sheep." Again, Jesus asks if Peter has divine love for Him and once again Peter replies by saying that in His (Jesus') perfect knowledge, Jesus already knows that he has human love and affection for Him.

It's pretty much the same routine but this time Jesus does not make Peter work through any comparative measure ("me" versus "these"). He just says, "Do you love me" and after Peter responds with his limited understanding of truth, Jesus then asks him to shepherd His sheep. So despite Peter's continual failure to believe, Jesus still gives Him even greater responsibility—the hands-on care for the people which God will send Him. This is Jesus way of saying, "Peter I trust you; Peter you can do it; Peter, I love you." "Don't worry about having blown it; my entire confidence is in you because I am in you." "It's ok; it really is ok!" "We will get it done together."

It's kind of strange but this whole conversation seems to be operating on two totally different levels. Jesus means one thing and Peter does not comprehend it in the least. Sure he understands the "words," but to him they mean something different. Jesus words are being filtered through Peter's worldly understanding of love, success, failure, religion and responsibility. Therefore, Jesus' words just fly over the top of Peter's head.

Do you ever feel this way as you read the Bible? You think you know what it says but then later the Spirit gives you a glimpse of what He was really saying and you get all frustrated with yourself wondering why you did not figure it out before. It happens to me all the time. I read something in the Bible and if I am not careful to see with His eyes and understand with His mind, I naturally start to filter everything through my limited understanding of things and all my filters and His words fly right over the top of my head. Sure, I understand the “words” He uses, but His meaning is so often lost on me.

This is why we need the mind of Christ, the secret wisdom of God; which, by the way, is available to us. In fact, the reason God has given us His Spirit is so we can know the wonderful things of God—even His deep secrets (**1 Corinthians 2**). Jesus wants us to know and understand His heart and His mind so we can experience and know the true depths of His love for us. He wants us to mature from these lambs that still must nurse to mature sheep that are free to graze in His fields.

And then to just put the icing on the cake, so to speak, and to perfectly communicate how strongly He feels about this issue, to metaphorically cancel out in Peter’s mind any remnant of hesitation caused by his 3 denials, Jesus 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 everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

This is absolutely fascinating. Jesus did not employ the divine love in this question but He utilized “*phileo*” or human love. Peter do you have human love

and affection for me...feed my sheep. This is mind blowing! Do you grasp the implication? Jesus is saying, "Peter, even the fact that you have any amount of human love for me just proves that I loved you, chose you, qualified you, and have now given you this assignment; and it all had nothing to do with anything you have done or ever will do. In fact, while you were still a sinner, I died for you just so you can love me (**Romans 5:8**).

This is entirely consistent with what He said to His disciples in **John 15:16**, "You did not choose me, but I choose you." Yes, the only reason Peter could have any affection for Jesus is because Jesus first loved him. In this final question Jesus basically was communicating the following: "You were not seeking me, but I was seeking you and I found you and you are exactly what I wanted; so go head, go out and feed my sheep." "It's ok, I know you blew it, but it does not matter to me. I know you don't feel worthy, but you are; I died for you and have made you worthy." I love you—so feed my sheep!

I don't think Peter even understood where Jesus was going with this third question as he was grieved that Jesus even asked it while making reference to human love. I think Peter was thinking: ok, I have admitted that I don't think I have divine love for you, but of course you know I have human love for you. I have proven it. After all, can't you see that I'm soaking wet here; I was the one who jumped in the lake and swam to see you. In being grieved, it's clear that Peter was not entirely purged of his pride. Peter wanted Jesus to know that he loved Him and get some recognition for the ways he has proven his love. Jesus, on the other hand, just wanted Peter to know that he could only say that he loved Jesus because He (Jesus) had first loved Peter.

Like us, Peter's worldview—his emotional, intellectual, and spiritual framework—had no experience with a love that was not earned. It did not fit into any box that he had known (especially his religious box). This was an entirely new paradigm of existence. And because Jesus loved Peter, he could feed the lambs, shepherd the sheep, and even feed the sheep.

I love the way that Jesus communicated this message 3 times to Peter and then dropped it. He clearly emphasized the truth but He did not feel the need to absolutely convince Him of the truth. That would be the job of the Holy Spirit and Jesus knew that it would take *time* and *rain* for Peter to come to believe the extent to which Jesus truly loved Him—and He also knew that in a very short time there was going to be some serious rain which the Spirit would pour out.

Isn't this passage so beautiful and tender? Thank you Jesus for loving us the way you do and for letting us be a part of your great plan for the world even though we don't deserve any of it. Thank you for never dealing with us on the basis of our sin and failure but consistently on the basis of your amazing love.

John 21:18-19

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."
(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)

Thank goodness John explained this to us or I am sure people would have wrangled over this for centuries. Jesus uses two contrasting word pictures to prophecy over Peter's life. The first is of a boy who gets to run around and do what he wants and the second is of an old man who simply cannot. In other words, during his life Peter was going to have great freedom in the Spirit to do what God has asked him to do: feed the lambs as well as tend and feed the sheep. But when he was an old man, things would suddenly be different. The Romans would take his arms and stretch them out on that cross beam and carry him to the cross.

Historical writers state that about thirty-four years after this event Peter was crucified under Emperor Nero. However, he deemed it so glorious a thing to die for Christ that he begged to be crucified with his head downwards, not considering himself worthy to die in the same posture in which Jesus died. And sure enough Peter proudly endured the agonizing death and went home to be with Jesus. As John predicted, it was a glorious death and God was honored!

John 21:19-23

And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who will betray you?" Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?" Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me." So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn't die. But that isn't what

Jesus said at all. He only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

It is clear that when Jesus said, "follow me" He meant spiritually (in that Peter was to follow only Jesus' voice in His life) as well as physically (now get up and follow me and we will talk a bit further). We know this because when Peter followed Jesus it stirred up the rivalry within John's heart and he follows them as well. John could not really help himself; after all, he did not want to be left out or miss anything.

Then, I believe, just to continue to poke at this silly rivalry, John reminds us that even though Jesus did not call him over to tell him anything super-cool, that he was the one who was leaning on Jesus the last night they were together—that he was the one whom Jesus loved. I think John is actually kind of poking at himself and letting us know that, despite the rumors that he was some super-special disciple who would not die, he was just a normal dude filled with the normal jealousies and competitiveness with which we all seem to struggle.

Peter also struggled in this same jealous and insecure way. Instead of asking Jesus to explain how he would be empowered with divine love to care for others or something cool about the end times and Jesus' second coming, he turns and asks Him about John. "What about him?" If there was ever a wasted opportunity this had to have taken the cake. Time alone with the resurrected Jesus and Peter focuses on his petty rivalry with John. Unbelievable!

I love that fact that Jesus did not even entertain Peter's itch. He just pointed Peter back to Him. What happens with John is my business and it is not yours. It

does not matter if I let him live forever—all that matters is what I have asked of you—you follow me!

This is a good reminder for all of us. It is far too easy to take our eyes off what God has asked of us and put them on what others are doing. In those moments, we foolishly choose to see from our eyes and not His eyes and understand with our mind and not His mind. Remember, God's economy is upside down and inside out and rarely makes sense to us. He does what He wants to do and He usually does not ask our permission. So don't even waste your time trying to figure out how He is moving (or to what extent He is moving) in the life of others. Besides, we have a hard enough time listening, waiting, and paying attention to His voice in our own lives that we do not need to be distracted by what He chooses to do with others.

Sure there are times where I think I might be missing something. I know people who have planted churches and, in less time than what we have been around, already have a church that is way bigger than ours. So every once in a while I find myself thinking that it would be nice to have a bigger church. Then there are times I see couples together and I think, hey what about me. I see people who own their own homes, drive nice cars, get new clothes and I think, hey what about me. I'm working hard over here, for you! That way of thinking is so ridiculous and terribly short-sighted. Those thoughts just remind us that the disgusting "ME" monster is always ready to resurrect if we ever choose to feed it and give it life.

We have to remember that God is in control and He is our Good Shepherd. He is doing with each of us exactly what He wants. We are His sheep. He chose us

and He purchased us with His very own blood. He loves us and wants nothing more than for us to experience Him and always remain in His love. These truths need to be our maniacal focus—not what is going on with others.

John 21:24-25

This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here. And we know that his account of these things is accurate. Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.

The one whom Jesus loves is the one who wrote this gospel and as he has stated before, we can know that his account is true. First of all, he says “we.” This was an obvious challenge to anyone who doubted anything John wrote to come and search out the truth. There were plenty of people around who had followed Jesus, heard what He taught, saw what He did; and, if anyone wanted to, they could come and interview them, talk to them, and find out for themselves. Of course, John knew that everything he wrote would be validated and corroborated time and time again. He had total confidence that if anyone honestly checked out the facts that there would be no question that he did not exaggerate or expound on anything, but it was all written exactly as it happened.

Then just to make the point he includes a little hyperbole: “I ***suppose*** the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.” Beyond stirring our imagination about the incredible things in which he got to participate and the absolute marvel of Jesus, John wrote this to make a clear contrast between

writing that would be more akin to mythology or legend (which accompanies most historical literature) and the facts to which he has attested and has given sworn testimony. This is why John always gave us minute and even miniscule detail after detail so we would know that he was there and an eye-witness to the events he wrote about. And, as we studied last week, all of it was written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ—our Christ!

Do you believe? Do you really believe? Do you just call Him Lord or do you live as if He is your Lord? We have finished this marvelous book and it has blown me away over and over again. But I think the *one* thing that I have learned most is to begin to believe that He truly does love me and that He wants nothing more than for me to choose to trust myself to Him and be His son—not His slave, but His son. To choose to believe Him even when I don't like what is going on in my life. To choose to believe Him and remain in fellowship with Him because nothing else can or will satisfy; all else will leave me with empty nets. To choose to believe Him and let Him be my defense, my protector, my care-taker, my provider, and the lover of my soul. Please, join with me and believe! Together, with Him, we can do it. In closing, I want to us to read *Psalm 63*. For me it is a passage that is very personal, but I also believe it captures perfectly the soul that *believes* Jesus is the Christ.

Psalm 63:1-11

O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water. I have seen you in your sanctuary and gazed upon your power and glory.

Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise you! I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer. You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise you with songs of joy. I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night. Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely. But those plotting to destroy me will come to ruin. They will go down into the depths of the earth. They will die by the sword and become the food of jackals. But the king will rejoice in God. All who trust in him will praise him, while liars will be silenced.

Let's Pray