

DO YOU LOVE ME?

John 21:15-23

We've heard the story of how seven of the disciples went fishing one night during the forty-day period between the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus. They had fished all night and had no success and as they had given up and were ready to come back to shore, a person on the shore called out to them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. When they did, the net was filled with fish. John concluded (or simply recognized) that the person on the shore was the Lord. Peter jumped out of the boat and headed toward shore. When they all got there, Jesus told them to come and eat.

Apparently, the appearance of Jesus was different after the resurrection because the disciples did not always recognize Him. First, Mary thought that He might be the gardener when she saw Him on the morning of the resurrection, then on the road to Emmaus several disciples failed to recognize Him until He broke the bread at supper, in the upper room later that night and one week later and now along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This group was a little hesitant and uneasy with the situation. So once again, the Lord of Glory was in the role of a servant, taking bread and fish to the disciples that they might be nourished. He gave them something of substance. In that day, they ate what we would call a "working man's breakfast."

Do You? – 21:15-17

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ 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." John 21:15–17 (ESV)

At the previous meal they had eaten together, Jesus had given the eleven disciples a new commandment that they love one another in the same way Jesus loved them. At that point they really did not know the extent of His love for them. As they would later learn, it was a love that would literally result in His death. In John's account, immediately before that, Jesus told them that He was going away and they could not follow where He was going. Peter had apparently focused on the fact that Jesus was going away and he questioned why he could not follow Jesus since (as he boldly stated) that he was willing to die for Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, this statement of loyalty to Jesus was made by Peter after they had left the room where they had eaten the Last Supper and had arrived at the Mount of Olives. In was in Mark's and Matthew's account that Jesus told them that "all of them would fail in their faithfulness to Him that very night." This statement was in connection with the reference to "the Shepherd being struck and the sheep being scattered." Both Matthew and Mark recorded the words of Peter that "all the rest may prove to be unfaithful, but I will not."

It seemed as if Peter was boasting that he loved Jesus more than the others did. That was when Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him three times. Now (weeks later), at this breakfast which was symbolic of the start of a new day, Jesus asked Peter if he still claimed to really love Him more than the others. The word Jesus used for "love" was agape which we recognize as the highest, most selfless kind of love. It was the kind of love that Jesus had shown by laying aside His glory and coming to earth, it was the kind He had shown by laying aside His robe and washing the disciples' feet, and it was the kind of love He had shown by laying aside His life to pay the penalty for our sin when He died on the cross. It was what Jesus was talking about when

He said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In fact, John records (John 13:37) that Peter used these very words in speaking to Jesus: "I will lay down my life for You." Now Jesus was asking, "Peter, did you really mean what you said?"

Notice how Peter was now unsure of himself. He didn't boast anymore about having agape, but replied, "Lord, I have affection for you." Jesus repeated the same question and Peter gave the same answer. Jesus then changed the question to him by asking, "Are you really sure that you have affection for me?" Peter had been tamed. At this point, he had developed a contrite spirit. This was what Jesus was looking for as is recorded in Isaiah 66:2: "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." Peter's answer showed the contrite attitude: "Lord, you know me – what is on the inside. I can't confess agape love that would let me lay down my life for You, but I do have affection for You." Jesus can work with that attitude in our lives. He can and will supply the power to make up for what we lack by pouring out His love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us.

Each time Jesus asked Peter the question "Do you love Me?" He followed it with instruction to "Feed my lambs" or "Feed my sheep." Jesus had just demonstrated in a physical sense what it means to feed someone. They had been out all night trying to find food in the natural world using their own strength. They had failed. With just a little direction from the Lord they were able to have abundance – more than they could receive. Not only that, when they got to shore, there was food waiting for them that was not as a result of their own work. It was prepared and ready to eat, it was food of substance that could get them through the day. Those who would feed the "sheep of God's pasture" could learn from Jesus' example.

Another implied lesson we might learn from this exchange between Peter and Jesus is that our love for God finds its expression in actions that are aligned with and in harmony with the character of God. We recall that Jesus had described Himself as "the Good Shepherd" and the call to His disciples was and is to follow Him. A shepherd is to feed the sheep and lambs in his care.

It may be helpful to look a little deeper into what motivated Peter to make the statement he did regarding his loyalty to Jesus before Jesus was arrested. Of course, an obvious possibility was "agape love" for Jesus. Another possibility was pride and Peter's confidence in his own ability to do whatever he wanted to. It is also likely that Peter saw himself as the assistant leader of the group and he had his reputation to protect. A fourth and somewhat related motivation was that "protecting the leader" was a duty that needed to be upheld by all those in the group. A fifth possibility is that there may have been a dread of the consequences of being disloyal to the Messiah.

All five of these motivations were possibilities that could be factors in understanding events that had happened in the fourteen-hundred-year history of the nation of Israel relative to their (dis)loyalty or (un)faithfulness to God. They certainly had national pride in that they boasted that they were God's chosen people. Some of their actions as a nation were done in an effort to protect their reputation by putting on a grand and glorious outward show of virtue while hiding the evil intent of so much of what they did in taking advantage of the powerless. Many times, the devotion of the people was to a leader rather than devotion to God and consequently, they found themselves acting contrary to Godly precepts because they did what an evil king told them to do. Finally, the lesson learned during the exile in Babylon had given rise to the Pharisaical hyper-obedience and somewhat mindless obedience to the strict letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law because of the fear of what might happen to them that would be a repeat of the Babylonian exile. The missing element was, of course, genuine love for God that

would have resulted in a proper relationship that would have given them blessings and successes and an unprecedented and unending leadership role in the world.

Will You? – 21:18-19

¹⁸ 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.” ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” John 21:18–19 (ESV)

From a purely physical view point, the words in verse eighteen are generally true and describe what all of us will experience if we live into what we call old age. Most of us still fit into the category of being “relatively young” in that we can still take care of the basics of daily living such as getting up each morning, getting dress, and doing whatever needs to be done. Admittedly, we do all this a lot slower than we used to, but we are still functioning fairly well. However, just as Jesus predicted what would be happening to Simon Peter later in his life, we can realize that a time is likely to come when we will need some help in doing the simple routine things such a getting dressed, preparing something to eat, cleaning our home, and going anywhere. Since we know what is coming, then we should start preparing for it by thinking ahead and making arrangements for help.

As these words were specifically directed to Simon Peter, the message had ominous implications related to persecution and suffering that he would experience before he died. The details mentioned are said to be in reference to his death by crucifixion. We might ask if Peter knew the significance of these words at that time and it is likely that he did not know. Obviously, this last chapter of John’s gospel was added following the death of Simon Peter nearly thirty years later.

If the proper action for pending physical maturity (old age) is to prepare for it, then what would logically be the proper action for Peter to be prepared for a time when he would not be free to do what he wanted to do? Jesus told him that the way for him to be prepared for whatever was coming could be summarized in two words: “Follow Me.”

If we were to merge these two scenarios into a general life-lesson statement, then it might be something like “Do all you can do that contributes to a positive outcome while you are still able so that when situations change and you can no longer operate as you would like, you will be ready and able to face whatever happens.”

What About . . . ? – 21:20-23

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” ²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” John 21:20–23 (ESV)

Most people assume that the reason Peter raised this question regarding what would happen to “the other disciple” (presumed by many to be John) was just a typical Simon action of interjecting himself into whatever situation he encountered. It would have been admirable if it had simply been that Peter had a genuine sense of concern for John and perhaps wanted to be helpful to John. The immediate diversion to change the subject right after Jesus had told him what old age would be like for him seems typical of Peter who was impetuous and was looking ahead to the next event rather than examining and learning the details of what he had just learned. We saw this same type of “running ahead” when Jesus told them He was going away

but that they would be “left behind” and they were to love one another in the same way that Christ had loved them. Peter completely missed the part about loving as Christ did and was still focused on going where Jesus was going. This seems to be similar to the mind set of many in the church today where the followers of Jesus who are “here and now” for the purpose of impacting the world for the Kingdom of God. However, we seem to look past that function and are focused on being raptured out of the world and go to heaven.

Several years ago in a sermon in our church, the preacher referenced the passage in Acts 1 regarding what Jesus told His followers immediately prior to His ascension. There were three promises mentioned. First, the Holy Spirit would come. Second, the followers of Jesus would be witnesses and (third) that Jesus would return. When the speaker mentioned point one involving the coming of the Holy Spirit, there was no comment from the congregation. When he mentioned that Jesus told them they would be His witnesses, there was no comment from the congregation. When the fact of Jesus' return was mentioned there was a chorus of Amens and like comments. That same scenario was repeated each time the three points of the promises were reviewed. It became quite obvious that we seem to be a lot more enthusiastic about the return of Christ and being raptured out of the world than we are about carrying out the Great Commission to be witnesses so that we can make disciples of all nations.

Peter had been given his mission in life as he followed Jesus and that was to feed the sheep and lamb for whom the Good Shepherd had given His life. That would be difficult enough to do in the environment of the world during that first century without Peter dividing his attention to things and concerns about what might happen to John.

The application of this advice to us today is obvious that our first priority should be to live our lives in such a way that Christ is exalted and that we must take the opportunities that life gives us to share the good news of the gospel. The idea of interjecting ourselves in the business of other people should be low on that list of priorities.