

“DO YOU REALLY LOVE ME?”

John 21:15-19

Pastor Keith E. Gephart

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wished that you could have a second chance?

Peter needed one of those! He had miserably failed in denying his Lord **three times** on the night of Jesus’ trial; his loyalty and love were in question. Most likely, he had also hurt his credibility with the other disciples and his leadership potential took a big hit!

Evidently Jesus had already taken steps to prepare for Peter’s restoration.

- *Christ had prepared Peter for his “fall” and attack by Satan and assured him of His prayer for him and of his “conversion” that would enable him to “strengthen” his “brethren.” (Lk. 22:31-32)*
- *Most likely Jesus had forgiven Peter when He had personally appeared to him (Lk. 24:34; I Cor. 15:5).*
- Also, Jesus had called for Peter by name to meet Him in Galilee (Mk. 16:7).

Now Jesus finishes the job of restoring Peter to a confident relationship with Himself, to restore the confidence of the other disciples in Peter, and to restore Peter to leadership in ministry with His followers.

However, we must **not** press this sanction to the point of Peter’s “absolute primacy.”

Nor does the text show him to be **superior** to John. John maintains an especially close relationship with the Lord.

Notice the similar circumstances of the two events: the denial and the renewal:

- Charcoal fire (18:18)
- **Denied** the Lord **3 times** in the presence of **his enemies** (18:17, 25, 27).
- **Affirms his love** the Lord **3 times** in the presence of his **friends**.
- The prediction of the denial was introduced with a solemn “truly, truly”—13:38; immediately following Peter’s confession Jesus uses the expression again (v. 18).

In this text we see that Jesus gave Peter a second chance to *affirm his love for Christ*, to *commit to the service of Christ’s church*, and to *remain faithful even unto death*.

The Lord gives us opportunities for the same!

I. THE OPPORTUNITY TO AFFIRM LOVE FOR CHRIST (15-17)

Note his name “Simon Peter” and that Jesus calls him “Simon son of John”

A. The Comparison Made—“More than these”—**3 options**

- 1) “More than these men love me?”
- 2) “More than you love these men?”
- 3) “More than you love these things?” Which is correct?

View 1 is the most likely.

- Would Jesus ask Peter to compare his love with the strength of the love of others? [He could in order to get Peter *to see the folly of such comparisons, and to see how miserably he had fallen short of such.*]

- Peter had professed that very thing—his devotion went beyond that of the others (Mt. 26:33; Mk. 14:29—“I will never fall away”; cf. Jn. 13:37—“I will lay down my life for you.”)
- “Peter, do you still think that your love excels that of the others? His trusting in self had brought his downfall.
- Peter had made this profession at the very time Jesus predicted a later meeting with him in Galilee (Mt. 26:32-33).

View 3 is unlikely because Peter totally dropped the comparison in his answer to Jesus. Why would he do so if fishing was the point of comparison? But if people were involved, he would likely do so. Moreover, as Plummer says, “at this stage in S. Peter’s career Christ would not be likely to ask him whether he preferred his boat and nets to Himself” (p. 352-53).

View 2 is unlikely, for Jesus would hardly pit love for the disciples against love for himself, when *everywhere in John’s writings love for the brethren is seen as a measure of love for the Lord!*

View 1 fits the context, for Peter had not wanted Jesus to die; but He did. How now will his devotion to Jesus fare? Will he love Christ as He is and not as he wanted Him to be? Does he really love Jesus?

B. The Love Questioned

The issue of the two different words for “love” used by Jesus and Peter: *Agapao* and *Phileo* (αγαπαω and φιλεω)

Two basic views:

- 1) Those who hold that Jesus and Peter made a distinction between the meanings of the two words.
- 2) Those who believe that John uses the words here with no real distinction of meaning.

The first view has two variations:

- a) That *agapao* is the higher word and that Peter intentionally uses the word with less level of commitment. For example, “Jesus asks Peter if he has “a profound love for Him, and Peter, not daring to claim so much, replies that he is fond of Jesus.”
- b) That *agapao* is the inferior word and that Peter intentionally uses *phileo* because it better shows the depth of his love and commitment. Jesus asks whether Peter has “a rather cool type of affection for Him and Peter” replies that “he has more than that, he has a warm love.”

The problem is that these two views cancel out one another. If a variation in vocabulary is significant, then why can’t the experts agree on the significance?

That leads us to the second major position: The words are used with no real distinction in meaning between them.

- John habitually uses words with slightly different variation from a previous statement (throughout the gospel) for variety but with no distinct difference in meaning.

- When Peter said after the **first** and **second** questions “yes Lord”, that does not sound like Peter was objecting to Jesus’ choice of word! He was not correcting Jesus. Why should Peter say “yes” if he really meant “no”?
- Peter is concerned that Jesus seems to be questioning his love, not the precise quality of his love. He accepts Jesus’ word, not declining it.
- **The third question is asked exactly the same except for the different word—confirming that no difference in meaning is intended.** Otherwise Christ would have asked Peter two different questions—not one question three times—and that would mitigate the powerful effect of the three-fold question in relation to Peter’s **three-fold denial**.

1. Jesus’ questions: “Do you love me (agapao), more than these?” “Do you love me?” “Do you love me?” (phileo).
2. Peter’s answers: “Yes, Lord; **you** know that I love (phileo) you.” “Yes, Lord; **you** know that I love you. “Lord, **You** know all things; **you** know that I love you.”

Peter cannot appeal to the clear evidence *of his actions!* But he can appeal to the *evident knowledge* that the Lord possesses. He does not claim to be “thoroughly acquainted with the state of his own heart, he casts himself upon (and appeals to) the penetrating knowledge of his Lord” (Hend. 487)—“You know that I love you.”

Peter was sad that Jesus asked him the same question the third time!
Not that He changed the verb!

Peter’s fuller reply here does lack the “Yea, Lord” of the first two answers. He does not give his **own affirmative** this time, but rests upon the Lord’s intimate knowledge. “Lord, You (emphatic) know all things; the Lord knows all details. This is a *high view of the person of Christ* (See 2:25; 16:30). He knows what occurs in men’s hearts! “You (emphatic) know that I love You. (The Lord knows the details about Peter specifically; what happens in his heart.)

But, Peter also had the opportunity to commit to service for Christ.

II. THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMIT TO SERVICE FOR CHRIST (Peter’s Commission)

The work of the fisher gives place to that of the shepherd: the souls that have been brought together and won need to be fed and tended”

1) v. 15—“Be feeding my lambs”

2) v. 16—“Be shepherding my sheep” This verb implies more guidance than “feed”.

3) v. 17----“Be feeding my sheep”

Note that in all three cases, they are “My” lambs and sheep! They are not Peter’s.

The terms show His “*tender affection for his own*” (p. 488). The word “lambs” looks at believers as “*weak and immature; hence, in need of the strengthening food of the Word*”; “sheep” in the sense of proneness to wander and dependence upon the shepherd; if *προβατιον* is a valid reading, then “little sheep” would look at believers as “immature and in need of the tender and loving nourishment of the Word.”

****Peter had experienced this tender loving care from His Shepherd**—he had been weak, wandering, yet the Lord kept him as a tender little sheep, the object of His care. Now Peter, having been restored, must so treat the other believers and help “shepherd” them and “feed” them. **He must not neglect his work among the flock.** *Peter got the message; see I Peter 5:1-4.*

Not only did Peter have the opportunity to affirm his love for Christ, to commit himself to the service of Christ’s church, he also has the opportunity to remain faithful even unto death.

III. THE OPPORTUNITY TO REMAIN FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH (18-19)

In 13:37 Peter had said to the Lord, “I will lay down my life for you.” **But then he turned around that very night and denied the Lord three times!**

Now the Lord gives him the opportunity he had asked for.

A. Jesus is referring to Peter’s death (v. 19)

1. The death is not normal—it is martyrdom.
2. Through this death Peter would “glorify God.”

B. Jesus contrasts Peter’s behavior in his youth with that of his old age (18).

- At this point Peter was likely middle-aged.
- When he was younger he did what he pleased—clothed (girded) himself, walked about where he wished.
- When he grows old he will be forced to do what is unpleasant—“*stretch out his hands*”, “*be girded*” (tied up) by someone else, be taken where he does not wish to go.
- Stretching forth of the hands” was regarded in the early church to be a reference to crucifixion.
- The use of *ζωννυμι* may help confirm this view here—the crucified were often bound to their crosses by ropes.
- Tertullian tells us that Peter was crucified under Nero in Rome, and he sees these words in John as finding their fulfillment in that incident.
- Eusebius tells us that Peter, after preaching in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia, at his own request, was crucified in Rome head downward

“FOLLOW ME” says Jesus to Peter; This was a renewed call to discipleship and to the duties as an apostle.

CONCLUSION

This scene shows us Peter’s complete restoration to leadership by Jesus.

****Three times he denied Christ. **Three times he affirms his love for Christ.**

****Three times Christ commissions him to care for the flock.**

****This was also a visible demonstration to the others!**

****Despite Peter’s mistakes, Peter was restored to a place of trust.**

****Love is clearly the basic qualification for Christian service! It is truly *indispensable***