**The Gospel of John: The Question**

**Do You Love Me?**

*John 21:15-25*

**Context**

When Jesus asks the question to Peter, “Do You love Me?,” He’s asking if his love is self-less and above the love for all else. To rightly understand the gospel, we have to understand what Jesus is calling us to. The true gospel call to follow Christ is one of self-denial. It is a full submission to His Lordship over everything. We must empty ourselves, abandon our own will, and fully and joyfully live life for the glory of God—with eternal benefits.

**Luke 9:62***—But Jesus said to him, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

**Luke 14:26-33***—“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.****27****Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.****28****For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?****29****Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him,****30****saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’****31****Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?****32****Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.****33****So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”*

**Matthew 7:13-14***—Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.****14****For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

What we see in this portion of Scripture is a complete commitment to Christ. To love, sacrifice, obey and follow Him supremely. He requires nothing less. It’s not difficult to understand, but it is an ongoing challenge to think and do what He calls us to do.

Leading up to this, Peter has failed the Lord on multiple occasions. He overestimates himself and underestimates temptations. He thinks he’s more committed to Christ that what he is. He thinks his love is greater than it is. At this point in his life, he’s struggling. He’s seen the risen Christ, but his bitter weeping over his rejection of Christ is likely lingering in his mind. Here, Christ restores him in a dramatic way and in so doing, gives us hope when we struggle with our faith.

**The Gospel call**

1. **Love above all else**

**John 21:15-17**—*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.”****16****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.”****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 all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.*

* + 1. A primary characteristic of a believer is love for God

**Deuteronomy 6:4-5**—“*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!****5****You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*

* + - 1. That love has been characterized by obedience

**Deuteronomy 10:12-13**—“*Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,****13****and to keep the Lord’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?*

**Deuteronomy 11:1**—“*You shall therefore love the Lord your God, and always keep His charge, His statutes, His ordinances, and His commandments.*

**Psalm 18:1**—*“I love You, O Lord, my strength.”*

* + - 1. If Peter was to play an important and critical role in the life of the early church, he needed to be restored in his love
         1. Although Peter had forsaken the Lord, the Lord had not forsaken him

**Romans 8:31-32**—*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?****32****He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*

* + - * 1. Jesus had already privately met with Peter (**Luke 24:34;** Cf. **1 Corinthians 15:5**)
        2. The denial was public and therefore the restoration would likewise be public
        3. The other disciples needed to hear it; we need to hear it
        4. They would, after all, follow his leadership
      1. Breakfast is finished and Jesus addresses him
    1. *Simon, Son of John*
       1. What Jesus calls him suggests a rebuke is coming
       2. Jesus had given Simon the name Peter (**John 1:42**)
       3. Whenever Jesus called him Simon, what followed was correction

**Mark 14:37**—*And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?*

**Luke 22:31**—“*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat;****32****but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”*

* + - 1. When he was acting like his old self, it seems like he was called by his old name
      2. When he was acting in faith, it seems like he was called Peter (Cephas)
    1. Jesus: *Do you love Me more than these?*
       1. What are “these”?
       2. More than your former occupation
       3. More than the boat, nets, and fishing gear
       4. Peter had disobeyed the Lord to return to fishing (**21:3**)
       5. Peter is to be a fisher of men, not a fisherman

**Matthew 4:19**—*And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*

**Luke 16:13**—*No servant can serve two masters; 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.”*

* + 1. The point: Jesus is challenging Peter to permanently abandon his former life and be exclusively devoted to following Him, based on his love.[[1]](#footnote-1)
    2. Peter: *Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.*
       1. Interesting word play in the Greek
          1. Jesus uses the word *agapao* (the highest love of the will) for love when Jesus says, “Peter, do you love (agapao) Me more than these?”

Cf. **1 Corinthians 13**

* + - * 1. Peter responds with the word *phileo* (a less intense word meaning affection) for love when he responds, “You know that I love (*phileo*) You.

Why? Why does Peter bring it down a notch in his love for Jesus?

Peter is just coming off a demonstration of his lack of love for the Savior

He is likely filled with self-doubt and guilt

He realizes he’s not as committed as he thought he was

I think he also is aware of Jesus’ omniscience. Jesus knows. He says as much: “*You know that I love You*”

* + - 1. Jesus graciously commissions him: *Tend My lambs*
         1. Be the herdsmen pasturing and feeding His sheep
         2. The sheep are the Lord’s (**John 10:1-18**; the parable of the Good Shepherd)
         3. Under-shepherd the sheep on earth

**Acts 20:28**—*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

* + 1. Jesus, a second time: “*Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”*
       1. The same play on the Greek words apply the second time as well.
       2. Peter still not willing to use the higher form of love is his response
       3. Jesus again graciously commissions him: *Shepherd My sheep*
          1. The word Jesus uses translated “shepherd” likewise carries with it the oversight of a pastor.

**1 Peter 5:1-2**—*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,* ***2****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*

* + 1. Jesus, a third time: “**Simon, son of John, do you love (phileo) Me?”**
       1. This time Jesus changes the word love to the lesser word
       2. Peter is grieved because of it
       3. The reason for his grief was because the Lord changed the word to *phileo*
       4. Jesus seems to call into question the lesser claim that Peter is making that he loves the Lord
       5. His actions might bring into question even that level of love
    2. The only response Peter had was to again say (relying on Jesus’ omniscience): *Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You*.
    3. Jesus for the third time graciously commissions him: *Tend My sheep*
       1. Jesus accepted Peter’s recognized failure and inadequacies
       2. Denied Jesus three times; restored three times
       3. Peter likely realized the emptiness of what he could do for the Lord in His own strength and was now more loyal to following Jesus and trusting in His enabling to do ministry

1. **Give above all else**

**John 21:18-19a**—*Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.”****19****Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God…*

* + 1. Peter would die a martyr
       1. This only serves to emphasize the price that one would be willing to pay

**Matthew 10:38-39***—And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.****39****He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.*

**Matthew 16:24***—Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.*

**Romans 14:8***—**for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.*

**Philippians 1:21***—For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

* + 1. Jesus: *Truly, Truly*
       1. Serious phrase
       2. Repeatedly used by John to make a significant truth
    2. When Peter was younger, he controlled his own actions
    3. But now, *when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you were you do not wish to go*
       1. There would come a day when he would be bound
       2. It would be against his will, and it would lead to his execution
    4. He would *Stretch out [his] hands*
       1. The implication is crucifixion
       2. John gives us the clarity of that by **v19**

***v19****—Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God…*

* + 1. Peter would live for 30 years following this encounter
       1. He clearly knew what was coming from the prophecy
       2. He knew what Jesus said would come to pass
    2. Why would Jesus tell him this?
       1. Wouldn’t it have been better that he not know?
       2. No. If it were, Jesus wouldn’t have told him.
       3. He needed to know that the next time he faced a denial, he would overcome.
       4. He needed the assurance of what he would do
       5. He would not deny the Lord again, but He would glorify Him through his death

**1 Peter 4:14-16**—*If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.****15****Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;****16****but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.*

* + - 1. Sidebar: Does the sovereignty of God cause you concern?
         1. Knowing that means that Jesus knows your every thought? [your doubts, fears, evil intentions, lusts, evil passions, love for things of this world]
         2. Balance that with the fact that His sovereignty also means He knows how much you love Him and are desirous of pleasing Him [your deep sorrow over sin, the deep pain for offending Him; your hunger for righteousness and your passion to His glory]
    1. According to tradition, he was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be crucified the same way as his Lord

1. **Follow above all else**

**John 21:19b-25**—*…And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!”* ***20****Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?”****21****So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”****22****Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!”****23****Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”* ***24****This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.* ***25****And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.*

* + 1. Jesus: *Follow Me!*
       1. You have no clearer statement on what it means to be a Christian than that

**John 12:26**—*If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.*

* + - 1. We follow (it is part and parcel of being a disciple)

**John 10:27***—My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;*

**John 8:12***—**Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”*

**Luke 5:11***—When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.*

**Luke 5:27-28***—After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me.”****28****And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.*

**Luke 9:23-25***—And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.****24****For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.****25****For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?*

* + - 1. It always means to obey His commands

**Matthew 7:21***—“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”*

**Luke 6:46***—“Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”*

* + - 1. We imitate Christ

**1 Thessalonians 1:6**—You also became imitators of us and of *the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit*

**1 John 2:6***—the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.*

* + 1. Peter turns around after Jesus says to follow
       1. Interesting “turn of events”
       2. He just was told to follow and then he turns around. Go figure?
       3. He wants to know what will become of his friend John
    2. Peter: *Lord, and what about this man?*
    3. John never identifies himself in his gospel account
       1. He fits the description

Cf. **John 13:23** (the one who leaned back on Jesus at the supper)

* + - 1. He was one of the 3 in the inner circle (Peter, James, and John)
      2. James was martyred earlier by King Herod (**Acts 12:2**)
      3. That only leaves John as the remaining option
    1. Peter, after hearing his fate, asks but is quickly interrupted
    2. Jesus: *If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?*
       1. That is not an answer but a rebuke
       2. None of your concern
       3. Peter, your concern is you—you follow Me!
       4. That’s the second time he says to follow Him (vv**19, 22**)
       5. Application: the Lord has a unique plan for each of His own

**Ephesians 2:10**—*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

* + 1. Apparently a rumor had been started that John would not die until the Lord returns
       1. Why was this important to squelch?
       2. If it were true, then his death before the Lord’s return would discredit Jesus
       3. Jesus would have made a false prediction and therefore not be God
    2. *Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”*
    3. John is an eye witness to these things
       1. They are true
       2. He’s not lying
       3. They are absolutely true but not exhaustive
    4. There were many other things as well
       1. Under the directive of the Holy Spirit, John gives us what he gives us
       2. He’s making an argument and is including those salient facts/events that support his claim (**Jn 20:30-31**)
       3. The four gospels give us exactly what the Holy Spirit wanted us to know
       4. It is completely sufficient for our purposes to believe
       5. Those Israelites who witnessed all that He did and yet remain defiant in their unbelief will be judged harshly

**Matthew 23:34-36**—“*Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,****35****so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.****36****Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”*

**Luke 19:41-44**—*He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it,****42****saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.****43****For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side,****44****and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”*

**Conclusion**

The question and challenge to Peter was to love Him supremely. This time, he did not disappoint. Repeatedly, when faced with major opposition and life-threatening situations, he did not back down. He stayed the course. He would follow Jesus regardless of the price. His love for Christ and the truth ultimately was validated by his death.

**John 15:13**—*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*

**Acts 17:6**—*When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also…”*

1. John MacArthur, The MacArthur NT Commentary, John 12-21, 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)