

The Word Became Flesh
Week 65
John 21:15-25
"Do You Love Me More Than _____?"

Introduction

Peter told Him, "Even if everyone falls away because of You, I will never fall away."

"Truly I tell you," Jesus said to him, "tonight, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

"Even if I have to die with you," Peter told Him, "I will never deny You," and all the disciples said the same thing. **Matthew 26:33-35**

In the final passage of John's Gospel, we see the public reinstatement of Simon Peter. Peter had denied The LORD publicly. Here John sees to it that all his readers know that Peter was forgiven and restored. It was important for everyone to be aware of this reality, for Peter was chosen to be the leader of the newly formed Church, and as such, it would have been vital for all Believers to know that he too, even though he was a very strong man physically, was frail and fallible (*as all of us are*), and he was also forgiven.

According to the Scriptures, Jesus had also made a private appearance to Peter the day of the resurrection (**Luke 24:34**). Perhaps The LORD did this because He was concerned for Peter's wellbeing. We know by reading the gospels that Peter was completely devastated after denying His LORD, and I like to think that Jesus, being the compassionate One that He is, could not bear the thought of Peter suffering any longer than was necessary. After all, Christ had told Peter just how bad He would mess things up before it ever happened.

Nothing that we do takes our God by surprise. In our own humanity, we sometimes think that if God only knew how many times we would fail, even after He had called us to Himself, that He never would have chosen us in the first place. But I am here to tell you that Jesus has always known every foolish choice that you will ever make. He knew it even before you were born, and yet, He still offers you His marvelous grace so that you can have the eternal life that accompanies genuine salvation.

Let's make this clear. None of us, after we have met Christ, *want* to sin! But sadly, sometimes our flesh takes us to places that we should not go. And afterward, just like Peter, we feel terrible and remorseful for our choices. Can I get a witness? I believe one of the true measures of genuine transformational salvation is the way that a Believer feels after they sin. And I imagine that Peter was feeling about as worthless as he could possibly feel after Jesus had risen from the dead. All the bragging that he had done about his loyalty and devotion was shown in the light of day for what it was, just empty promises. I can only imagine how this had torn the old fisherman's heart in two. Thank God, that our LORD doesn't quit on us, even when we quit on Him!

Even the Apostle Paul, as Spirit filled as he was, still struggled with sin. For this reason he wrote these words in **Romans, Chapter Seven**.

For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one that does it, but it is the sin that lives in me.

Romans 7:18-20

So when Jesus came to the shores of Galilee that day, it was for a couple on reasons. First, the disciples were not where they were supposed to be. They had strayed from the path, so He came to get them. Second, all of them needed to see firsthand that when God calls a man, He doesn't change His mind about Him (**Romans 11:29**), even when that man is prone to stray from his chosen path. God lovingly corrects His children. He doesn't discard them! Peter denied His LORD three times, so when Jesus came to restore him, He gave him three opportunities to proclaim his devotion. Three times the wayward fisherman was asked the question that the Savior asks of us all... **"Do you love Me?"**

#1. Do You Love Me? (vs. 15)

"When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?'"

"Yes LORD," he said to Him, "You know that I love You."

"Feed My lambs," He told him.

John 21:15

After Peter had had time to dry off by the fire and finish his breakfast, The Savior beckoned him to walk along the beach so that they could talk. We know this because a few verses later, John tells us that he tagged along behind them, to eavesdrop on the conversation (**vs. 20**). Peter was probably more than willing to depart from sitting around the charcoal fire that Jesus had made for them. For it would have served as a grim reminder to him of the things that he had said the last time he had stood and warmed himself by such a fire. For He had warmed himself by the same kind of fire as he denied the very One that he had pledged to follow unto death.

Guilt has a way of finding people; situations or even inanimate objects remind us of our failures. One moment we are sitting there enjoying breakfast, and the next moment a sound, or word, or even someone casually passing by serves to remind us that we are in no-shape-or-fashion the good person that we want the world to believe that we are. We work so hard to project an image of goodness, but as Paul said, there is always that sin that is within us. Jesus died to forgive that, just in case you were wondering. So give it to Him!

As Peter and Jesus walked, Jesus presented the old fisherman with his first question of loyalty. **"Peter, do you love Me more than these?"** Now Peter had indeed bragged the night before Jesus went to the cross that he was in fact more loyal to the Savior than anyone (**Matthew 26:33**). He had said it with confidence, for I am certain that he believed this in his heart. But then, there is always that sin that lies within us. We seem to keep forgetting about that, when we start to feel really good about ourselves. Do we not? Jesus had not been fooled by Peter's statement of undying love.

"Simon, Simon, look out. Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Luke 22:31-32

I just love how The LORD calls the man "Simon" when he messes up, but "Peter" when he does something good! Simon means "to hear", and Peter means "the stone". If you want to be rock solid in your faith then learn to listen to God when He speaks! We too have this dual nature. Some days we hear the voice of The LORD, and we get it right. Other days, not so much. Can I get a witness? The beauty of the words of Christ to Peter were, **"I have prayed for you"** and **"When you return..."** For you see, when Jesus prays for you, your return to the right path is never in question! And oh, by the way, *The Bible says that He now stands at the right hand of The Father to continually intercede on your behalf, if you belong to Him (**Hebrews 7:25**)!* So know this, you may really mess up if you belong to Christ, but you may rest assured that He will get you back on track.

There would be a lot less “self righteous” people in the Church today, if we would but realize that we aren’t in the least bit qualified to save ourselves, nor are we even qualified after our salvation to keep ourselves saved! This is why I am more frightened by self-righteous Christians than backslidden ones, or even lost people. The self-righteous Christian is more like the Pharisees that murdered Christ than anyone else in this world. Thankfully, after he had messed up so bad and Jesus came looking for him, Peter lost all of his cockiness. We can tell this by examining the original language of the text.

Jesus asked Peter, **“Do you love me more than these?”** There are a couple of things about this statement that I would like to point out. Many have taught that Jesus was asking him if he loved Him more than the other disciples, as he had bragged about just days earlier. These guys were always arguing about who was the greatest or most loyal among them. Jesus always discouraged that kind of activity. So I do not believe that this is what Jesus is asking Peter here. I think he is inquiring about Peter’s old life.

Think about it. When Jesus first called Simon to a life of service, He did it with a miraculous catch of fish. In fact, they caught so many fish, that the nets broke. You certainly cannot continue fishing with broken nets. So at that moment in time, Peter’s fishing career was ended. Jesus had called him to a new way of life. But after Peter’s denials, I believe The LORD wanted to test him. Once again the disciple had been provided with a miraculously large catch of fish, and the nets had remained intact (**John 21:11**).

Here was the perfect opportunity for Peter to go back to his old ways if he wanted. The nets were intact, and the catch was massive. It would have provided a great re-start to his old fishing business. When Jesus said, **“Do you love me more than these?”** I believe it was Peter’s boat, nets, and huge catch that Jesus was speaking of. The word in the Greek for “these” can also mean “these things”. It was as if Jesus was saying, “Peter, **choose this day, whom you will serve...**” (**Joshua 24:15b KJV**). Peter had to decide for himself which he loved the most; His LORD or his old way of life.

But there is another important thing that we should see out of this conversation. Peter’s confidence in his own fleshly loyalty had been forever erased. When Jesus asked Peter, **“Do you love Me?”** He used the word *agape*, which is the highest form of love. Peter responded with a different word, “*phileo*”, which describes a brotherly love or great fondness. It is a far inferior love word than what Jesus used. I believe that in his humility, Peter knew that despite his earlier claims, he in his flesh could never love Jesus the way that Jesus loved him. So he refused to boast of his great love, he simply wanted Jesus to know that although he did in fact love Him, he certainly should have loved Him more! Every Christian needs to be willing to admit that the very best that we have to offer is grossly inadequate.

God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world — what is viewed as nothing — to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in His presence. It is from Him that you are in Christ Jesus, Who became wisdom from God for us — our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption — in order that, as it is written: Let the one who boasts, boast in The LORD.

1 Corinthians 1:28-31

In his response to The Savior, Peter proved that he had learned his lesson well. Now, he was well on his way to becoming a leader of men.

#2. Do You Love Me? (vs. 16)

A second time He asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to Him, “you know that I love you.”

“Shepherd my sheep.” He told him.

Jesus asked the disciple again, using the exact same wording, **“Do you ‘agapaho’ Me?”** And again Peter’s response can best be translated, “LORD, You know that I am very fond of You.” The only difference in the first and second exchanges between the two are Jesus follow up statements. The first time, He commands Peter to “Feed My lambs.” The word that He used there is “*arnion*” in the Greek, and it is literally referring to a baby lamb. I am so glad that Christ used that word. Because I believe the first responsibility of those who are called to make disciples is to find the babes of this world and teach them the doctrines of the faith. We have a duty in our churches to teach our children the truths of the gospel. It is our highest calling. And not only to the little ones, but also to those out there who have no idea of just how God loved them so much that He sent His Only Son to die in their stead. And if they would just turn from their lives of sin to follow Christ, they too shall find in Him everlasting forgiveness and life.

The second time Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him and Peter responded with his humble response of fondness, Jesus said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.” For you see, although both lambs and adult sheep need to be fed, mature sheep also need to be led. It is the responsibility of every pastor (the word means “shepherd”) to lead those who have been placed under his watchful care. Peter was being called in that moment to become the leader of the newly formed Church of Jesus. It was a great responsibility indeed, and Peter was only just now humble enough in his spirit to be up to the task. He now realized that he could not do this in his own strength. He HAD to rely on Christ in order to lead Christ’s people. Peter had to come to the end of himself, in order to take up what Christ began. **God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6b).** It is a truth worth remembering, if you desire to lead the people of God.

#3. Do You Love Me? (vs. 17-23)

He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was grieved that He asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.” Jesus said. “Truly I tell you, when you were younger, you would tie your belt and walk wherever you wanted. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you and carry you where you don’t want to go.” He said this to indicate by what kind of death Peter would glorify God. After saying this, He told him, “Follow me.”

So Peter turned around and saw the disciple Jesus loved following them, the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and asked, “Lord, who is the one that’s going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”

“If I want him to remain until I come,” Jesus answered, “what is that to you? As for you, follow me.”

So this rumor spread to the brothers and sisters that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not tell him that he would not die, but, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”

The third time Jesus asked Peter about his love for Him, He uses Peter’s own love word. He says to him, **“Simon, do you ‘phileo’ (have affection for) Me?”** And it was this third inquiry that broke Peter’s heart completely (**vs. 17**). I believe that this convicted Peter all the more, realizing even the love for Christ that he did possess was still far short of what it should have been. In order to be fully

submissive to Christ, we must first be broken. Peter understood at this point what Jesus had taught them the night before He went to the cross, and that is “Apart from Him, we can do nothing” (**John15:5b**). As Peter became fully humbled and submissive to His LORD, he was instructed once more to become the leader of the fledgling Church. **“Feed My sheep.”** Jesus repeated this charge to him.

After this The Savior went on to tell Peter that a day was coming that he too would suffer and die at the hands of sinful men. For it was determined that Peter would one day have the opportunity to prove this love for Jesus that he had so often professed. *For if you go around saying that you love Jesus, sooner or later you will be given the opportunity to prove it!* This time Peter would pass his test of loyalty with flying colors. Church tradition tells us that he was crucified for his faith just as Christ had predicted. But when the time came for Peter to be crucified, he requested to be hung upside down on a cross for he was not worthy to die in the same way as his LORD! Peter had been transformed from a proud man to a humble servant. And it is all because of his failure, standing before a charcoal fire in the High Priest’s courtyard, that his brokenness came into being. He came to realize that Christ is everything, and we... are nothing. So be very careful when you boast in anything other than The LORD, or you may well have to give an account before a charcoal fire of your own!

When Peter learned of his fate, and how that he would be called upon as a martyr in order to glorify God, he spun around and pointed to young John who had been following at a distance to eavesdrop. **“What about him?” Peter asked.** Jesus basically replied was that it was none of Peter’s business what The LORD of the universe had in store for John. All that Peter needed to do was to concentrate on keeping himself on the right path as God had determined. Would to God, that all Christians would learn this message. *Make every effort to establish yourself in the will of God and let God worry about everyone else!* What a happy place the church would be, if we all just learned how to “stay in our own lane”, as it were.

In conclusion to his narrative, John goes on to point out that Jesus had never said John would live to see the rapture. Jesus had merely stated to Peter that if that were to be His will for John it was none of Peter’s concern. John was an older man when this gospel was written, and Peter was long since dead, so many Christians may have indeed wondered if John was meant to live until Christ’s return. After clearing this matter up once and for all, John closes out his wonderful gospel. And quite frankly, no one could have said it better than he. So in conclusion of this study, I leave you with the words of the Beloved Apostle Himself:

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.

And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if every one of them were written down, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.

And now the question that lies before each of us is simple: Do you love Jesus more than _____? Fill in the blank for yourself. For only you know the thing(s) in your life that are hindering you from loving The LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. **In the end, all that will matter is Christ.**

Truth!!!