

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 12 March 2017. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **“Lovest Thou Me?”**

### **John 21:15-25**

A couple weeks after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples for the third time—this time, by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus still had many things to say to His disciples, and many instructions to give them; but He was also *testing* them. For one thing, Jesus had instructed them that they were to go up into Galilee, and that He would meet them there. They obeyed that command, and passed that part of the test.

Another part of the test was in regard to how they would use their time. Jesus did not show up right away. Yet, rather than waste their time, they used the time wisely by going fishing, in order to provide for their families. The disciples waited for the Lord; yet, they “redeemed the time” while waiting.

It seems that Jesus was also testing their *level of expectancy*. They certainly *could have* become complacent while they were waiting; but they didn’t. After fishing all night without catching even one fish, a stranger came to the shore and said, “***Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.***” Now, if the disciples had thought that this man were anyone other than Jesus, they probably wouldn’t have thought anything of his advice. What difference would it make to cast the net on the right side of the boat? Yet, they didn’t laugh; they obeyed. Inwardly, they were probably nearly 100% sure that this was Jesus, because they remembered a time three years earlier when Jesus had instructed Peter to cast the net on the other side of the boat; and they had gotten more fish than their boat could handle. So, they obeyed the man, and cast the net on the right side; and immediately, the net was filled with fish. They all knew now that this man was the Lord; and Peter, not even thinking about the fish that needed to be gathered, immediately jumped into the sea and swam to Jesus. The disciples were *very* much waiting for the Lord. They yearned to fellowship with Him again; and their desire for fellowship was rewarded. When they got to the shore, Jesus already had breakfast ready for them. They had passed the test.

Yet, Jesus had another test for Peter. Without question, Peter had been restored to fellowship with the Lord; but what was the quality of Peter’s *love* for Jesus? As we will see today, Peter himself was unsure of how strong his love for the Lord really was. This morning, we will be examining Jesus’ test of Peter; and as we do so, we, also, will be put to the test. The title of this message is “***Lovest Thou Me?***”

#### **Read John 21:15-25**

##### **I. The quality of our love for Christ (vv. 15-16)**

Up to this point, Jesus seemed to be giving Peter every indication that he was still one of His Apostles. After all, Jesus appeared to Peter *first*, before He appeared to any of the other disciples. Also, Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit to Peter (along with the the other Apostles); and He said, “***As my father hath sent me, even so send I you.***” The word “Apostle” means “sent one.” Jesus was confirming to Peter that he was still one of His “sent ones.”

Yet, there still must have been some doubt in Peter’s mind as to what his position of service really was. Would Jesus really allow him to be one of His Apostles, after he had denied Him?

Up to this point, the Bible doesn't record that Jesus had actually *addressed* Peter about his failure; so Peter's mind must still have been filled with nagging doubts and fears. But now, the time that Peter had been dreading had finally come. Now that the meal was done, Jesus began to confront Peter about his failure. By the way, Jesus was very kind and gentle with Peter. He could have said, "I told you that you would deny me; but you didn't listen." Yet, He didn't do that. In fact, Jesus didn't *directly* say anything about his denial of Him. Instead, Jesus provoked thought in Peter by asking him some *questions*. **(Read verse 15 again.)**

Did you notice something about how Jesus addressed Peter? He didn't call him "Peter," did He? He called him "Simon." Why is that important? Well, "Simon" was the birth name that his parents gave him; but "Peter" was the *new* name that Jesus had given to him. The name "Peter" literally means "little stone." Jesus gave Simon this new name "Peter" in order to remind him of the *strength of character* that He intended him to have. For three years, Jesus had been moulding him, so that he would be like a "little rock"—hard, and steadfast. So, by calling Peter by his old name, Jesus was making a point. He was gently reminding Peter, "You have *not* been like a small stone, Simon. You have *not* been hard and steadfast. You crumbled under pressure from my enemies, and you denied that you even knew me."

So, Jesus called Peter "Simon." Now, let's look at Jesus' actual question. **(Read verse 15 again.)** What did Jesus mean when He said, "***Lovest thou me more than these?***" He was talking about the other men who were present. Jesus was saying, "Do you love me more than *these other Apostles* love me?" Now, why did Jesus bring the other Apostles into this? To answer that question, let's look at a statement that Peter made on the night of Jesus' arrest.

### **Read Matthew 26:31-33**

Do you see what Peter was implying? When Peter said, "***Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended,***" he was essentially saying, "I love you more than all these other men do." Jesus was now gently reminding Peter of what he had said. He was saying, "So, Peter, do you *really* love me more than all these other men do?"

Peter knew exactly what Jesus was asking him. He also knew what *quality* of love that Jesus was talking about. You see, in the Greek language, there are four different words for "love." First, there is the word *eros*. The word *eros* is never used in the New Testament (probably because it is such an unworthy kind of "love"). *Eros* is a *selfish* love—a love that is all about physical attraction and chemistry. In other words, *eros* is nothing but "lust." But then, there is the word *storge*. *Storge* is a much higher kind of love. The word *storge* means "natural affection." It is the natural kind of love that a person would have toward his wife or children.

Yet, *storge* is not the highest kind of love, because it is merely the natural kind of love that one would be *expected* to have toward his own family. (The Bible makes it clear that not loving your own flesh and blood is *unnatural*.) There is a higher kind of love than *storge*. It is called *phileo*. *Phileo* love is a "brotherly" kind of love. This kind of love is not merely confined to family relationships. It is a "companionable" kind of love. It is an affection that two friends mutually have toward each other. This kind of love responds to the other person's love by showing love in return. *Phileo* love says, "I love you because you love me."

Yet, as noble as it sounds, *phileo* love is not the highest kind of love. *Phileo* love can collapse in a time of crisis—because in reality, it is still based upon *what the other person does for me*,

or *how worthy that person is of my love*. That seems to be the kind of love that Peter had for Jesus on the night of His trial, doesn't it? When Jesus was arrested by the authorities, crisis struck; and within a very short time, Peter's love for Jesus seemingly crumbled.

So, what *is* the highest kind of love in the Greek language? It is **agape** love. **Agape** love esteems the other person without condition. It is a love that is willing to sacrifice for the other person, regardless of whether that person gives anything in return. In fact, it is a love that is able to extend even to someone who *doesn't love you* in return. It is the kind of love that Jesus was talking about in **Matthew 5:44** when He said, "***But I say unto you, Love (agapate) your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.***" **Agape** love is the kind of love that *God* has for us. Let's look more closely at the nature of **agape** love.

**Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a** (In this chapter, the KJV translators translated **agape** as "charity.")

*This* is the nature of God's love. This is **agape** love. Now, with this in mind, let's get back to our passage. Two times in a row, Jesus asked Peter "**Agapas me** (Lovest thou me)?" Jesus was asking Peter, "Do you love me with the noblest kind of love—the kind of self-sacrificing love that God has?" Now, Peter answered Jesus by saying, "**Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.**" But did Peter use the verb *agapao*? No. Peter used the verb **phileo**. All three times, Peter said, "**Philo**"—"I love you with *affectionate* love, Lord." Peter could not bring himself to use the highest word for "love," because he no longer trusted his own heart. His pride was broken. He remembered too well how quickly he had denied the Lord.

Can you relate to this, Christian? I certainly can! If Greek were my native language, and if I had to declare whether I love my Saviour with **agape** love or **phileo** love, it might be difficult for me to answer with absolute confidence. Like Peter, I know the weakness of my own heart. Far too often, my love for Him has not risen above **phileo** love. Now, I have never said "**I know not the man,**" as Peter said. I have never directly denied Christ with my lips. But far too often, I have denied Him by disobeying His commands, and by straying off into sin. Every child of God in this room would have to admit the same.

Now, that raises a question. Can *we* possibly love *Christ* with **agape** love? After all, we are sinners by nature. It is the nature of our old man to love self, and not others—and especially not God. Can we love Christ with **agape** love? Let's look again at what John said.

**Read 1 John 4:7-10, 19**

John says that "**Love (agape) is of God.**" True, pure, sacrificial love—the kind that has absolutely no self mixed in it—finds its source in God. He is the Author of true love. He is the one who loved us, and sacrificed His Son in order to save us, even though we were all ungrateful, wretched, sinful rebels. But can we really love Him with **agape** love? Well, let's look again at **verse 19**. (**Read verse 19 again.**) Surely when John said "**We love him,**" he was talking about **phileo** love, right? We know that God loves *us* with **agape** love; but we couldn't ever love Him back with pure **agape** love, could we? Actually....we can! When John said "**We love him,**" he was using the verb **agapao**. We *can* love God with **agape** love!

But how is this possible? How can we love God with pure love? Well, make no mistake about it: Loving God with pure, selfless love is not natural. It is *supernatural*. It is possible for a believer to have this kind of love for God; but only through the enablement of God Himself. *God* enables His people to have *agape* love. Let's see what Paul said about it.

### **Read Romans 5:1-5**

Did you notice what Paul said there in **verse 5**? He said that as you allow God to transform your life, "***the love of God is spread abroad***" in your heart. God places into your heart the pure, selfless love that He desires you to have. This love extends first toward God, and then toward other people around you. Brethren, we *can* have true love for God!

Now, if Jesus had told Peter that he really *could* love Him with *agape* love, I don't know whether Peter would have been ready to believe it. By the way, Jesus didn't try to press the point. He didn't say, "No, Peter, you *can* love me with *agape* love!" He accepted Peter's *phileo* love for what it was. But what Jesus *did* want Peter to know is that if he loved Him, there was a certain *proof* that should be evident in his life. Let's take a look at that proof.

## **II. The proof of our love for Christ (v. 17)**

**(Read verse 17 again.)** Two times in a row, Jesus asked Peter "***Lovest thou me?***" Both times, Jesus was using the word *agapas*; and both times, Peter answered by saying, "*Philo*"—"I love you with affectionate love, Lord."

But the third time, Jesus did not use the verb *agapao*. This time, Jesus used the same word that Peter had been using—the verb *phileo*. This time Jesus said, "*Phileis me?*" ("Do you love me with affectionate love?"). Basically, Jesus was saying, "Very well, then, Peter. If you can't love me with the highest kind of love, the *proof* of your love for me is still the same. If you love me with *phileo* love, then you will *prove* your love for me by feeding my sheep."

And with that, Jesus *publicly* restored Peter to his position as Apostle. Peter had denied Jesus three times publicly; therefore, Jesus publicly asked Peter three times whether he loved Him. Each time Peter replied by saying, "Yes, Lord, I do love you"—but with a weaker kind of love. Yet, even though Peter's love for Christ was far from perfect, the proof of his love was, nonetheless, that he would do what Christ had commanded him to do. Christ's command to Peter was to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. His command to Peter was to baptize those who believed on Him, and to **teach** them "***all things whatsoever I have commanded you.***" In other words, Peter was to feed God's people with God's Word. If Peter really loved Jesus, even with a *lesser* kind of love, then the proof of his love for Christ was *obedience*.

### **Read John 14:15**

Christian, do you fear that your love for Christ is lacking? If so, you have good reason to question your love for Him! We are still sinners; and as sinners, we are still prone to be selfish, and not to love Christ with perfect love. But the good news is that we have a loving and patient Saviour. Christ *will* enable you to love Him with the highest kind of love, if you will let Him. Through tribulations in your life, He will develop patience in you, then

experience, then hope—then perfect *agape* love. But as your love matures, the proof of your love is still the same: Obedience! Christian, do you love your Saviour? If so, obey Him!

### III. The *ultimate* proof of our love for Christ (vv. 18-24)

We have already seen that the proof of our love for Christ is *obedience*. In a moment, we will examine the *ultimate* proof of our love for Christ. But first, let's look at what Jesus said to Peter next. **(Read verses 18-24 again.)**

Peter had affirmed, for the third time, that he truly loved Jesus. But now that Peter had affirmed his love for Jesus, Jesus had some sobering news for him. He told him that one day his hands would be bound, and that he would be led away to a place that he didn't want to go. In other words, he would be executed. Lest there be any doubt about it, John lets us know, in **verse 19**, that Jesus was talking about the kind of *death* by which Peter would glorify God. Jesus was letting Peter know, in advance, that he would *die* for Him. Now, that's interesting, isn't it? What was it that Peter said on the night of Jesus' arrest?

#### **Read Matthew 26:34-35**

Peter thought for sure that he was prepared to die for the name of his Saviour. But in a moment of fear, he denied that he even knew him. You see, being willing to die for the Lord requires a higher kind of love than the love that Peter had for the Lord on the night of His arrest. It requires *agape* love. The good news is that Peter *did* quickly rise to this kind of love—the kind that is willing to sacrifice oneself for the Lord. For the rest of his life, Peter hazarded his life for Jesus Christ, and finally died a martyr's death. Let's examine a time, around A.D. 42, when it looked for certain as if Peter would die for the Lord.

#### **Read Acts 12:1-10**

Do you see the change in Peter? Peter was about to be executed the next morning; but rather than toss and turn and wring his hands all night, he slept peacefully! The angel literally had to hit him to wake him up. This is the "*peace of God, which passeth all understanding.*" The Bible says in **1 John 4:18**, "*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.*" The love that has no fear is *agape*—the highest, noblest kind of love. This is the kind of love that Peter had as he awaited his execution. Of course, it wasn't God's time for Peter to die yet; but Peter didn't know that. He was ready to die, and go to see the Lord whom he loved.

Years later, Peter truly was on the eve of his execution. Records of first-century Christians tell us that Peter preached the Gospel in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Betania, Asia, and finally Italy. (Incidentally, historical records say *nothing* about Peter being a bishop in Rome. He was *in* Rome, but he was never a bishop there.) Peter was arrested in Rome at about the same time that Paul was arrested; and on June 27, A.D. 67, both of them were put to death—Paul by beheading, and Peter by crucifixion. Peter was crucified upside down at his own request, because he didn't consider himself worthy of dying in exactly the same way that his Lord was crucified. But before his death, this is what Peter had to say about his coming death.

#### **Read 2 Peter 1:12-15**

Right up to the time of his death, Peter continued to “feed the sheep.” As Peter said in the passage we just read, his desire was to use what little time he still had left on earth to “stir up” God’s people—in other words, to stoke of the fire of their passion for God. Peter loved his Lord with *agape* love; and his continued obedience proved it.

Christian, the proof of your love for Christ is obedience. What’s more, true love for Christ doesn’t cease. It continues on. As Paul said in **1 Corinthians 13**, “*Charity* (agape love) *never faileth.*” The ultimate proof of our love for Jesus is that you continue to *follow* Him to death—even to a martyr’s death, if God will. That is why, after telling Peter that he would die a martyr’s death, Jesus then said, “*Follow me.*” (Read verse 19 again.)

Some of us may live until the Rapture. Every generation of believers has the hope of possibly living until the Resurrection Day, and of being caught up in the air without having to go through the veil of death. But whether we wake or sleep at the time of Jesus’ return, we should be ready to follow Him either to the end of our natural lives, or to a martyr’s death. By the way, when I go out on the street and preach, and I see the look of utter hatred and contempt in the eyes of many younger people, I cannot help but think that in another 20 years, when these people are our rulers, they will not be merciful to us. There is a virulent hatred of true, biblical Christianity in our world; and it will wax worse and worse. We *will* experience true persecution, brethren. It is coming. Are you ready for it? We should expect no less. William Tyndale, the Englishman whom the Catholic Church burned at the stake in 1538 for translating the Bible into English, certainly expected no less. In 1528, Tyndale made this statement about persecution:

“Tribulation for righteousness is not a blessing only, but also a gift that God giveth unto none but his special friends. The Apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer rebuke for Christ’s sake. And Paul, in the second epistle and third chapter to Timothy, saith, ‘All that will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution:’ and, Phil. 1 he saith, ‘Unto you it is given, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake.’ Here seest thou that it is God’s gift to suffer for Christ’s sake.” (*The Obedience of a Christian Man*, 1528)

Jesus called Peter to follow Him to death; and Peter took Him literally. Scripture indicates that Jesus began to walk along the lake; and Peter literally began to follow Him. In fact, John followed, as well. Let’s look at that Scripture again. (Read **John 20:19-22** again.)

Peter now knew that he would one day die for the Lord; and I’m sure that this was not particularly comforting to him. And so, what did he do? He started to look over his shoulder, and wonder about the next guy’s fate. He turned around, motioned toward John, and said, “***Lord, and what shall this man do?***” We are so much like Peter, aren’t we? How often do we say in our hearts, “Lord, is it fair that *I* should have to go through all these trials? I don’t have to go through all this by myself, do I?” Peter was beginning to get his eyes off the Lord, and compare himself to others. But Jesus quickly corrected him. He said, “***If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.***”

As it turned out, John did *not* tarry till Christ’s Second Coming. It has been nearly 2,000 years now, and Christ still has not returned. But John *did* live longer than any other Apostle did. He lived until about A.D. 98—more than six decades after Christ’s return to heaven! John also was the only Apostle who did not die a martyr’s death. He died of old age. Nonetheless, John suffered much for Christ. Around A.D. 95, when he was a very old man, he was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos by Emperor Domitian. He was released in A.D. 96,

after Emperor Domitian died; but what did he do after he was released? He went right back to planting churches and preaching! Even in extreme old age, he spent the last three years of his life serving Christ, and suffering for Him.

Christian, there is a cup of suffering that we all must take up. We all must suffer for Christ to one degree or another. But whether you suffer death for Jesus' name, or merely suffer mockery and rejection, Jesus says, "**Follow me.**" Let's look at one more Scripture.

### **Read Matthew 20:20-23**

James and John were confident that they were ready to take up whatever cup of suffering that was necessary in order to follow Christ; and they thought that they should be rewarded by sitting on Jesus' left and right hand in the future Kingdom. But Jesus quickly set them right. He informed them that they would, indeed, take up His "cup" and "baptism" of suffering. *That* was what they needed to be concerned about. By the way, it is a bit ironic that James and John turned out to be the *first and last* disciples to die. As we saw back in **Acts 10**, James was the very first Apostle to die for the Lord. He was killed by King Herod somewhere around A.D. 42. John was the last one to die; and, unlike all the others, who died by execution, John died a natural death. But both of them suffered for the Lord.

Brethren, we would all do well to ask ourselves this question, on a daily basis: "What is the quality of my love? Is my love for the Lord affectionate, but still capable of failing? Or is my love for Jesus of the highest quality--the kind that sacrifices for Him, and obeys Him in all things, and is willing to follow Him to death?"

#### **IV. The foundation of our faith (vv. 24-25)**

**(Read verses 24-25 again.)** We are now at the close of John's Gospel. In this book, we have read about eight miracles that Jesus did; and, as we saw back in **John 20**, John recorded these eight miracles so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God—and that believing we might have life through His name. But do we need to know *more* than this? Do we need to go around digging up ancient books in order to try to find out more information about what Jesus might have done? No. As John said, the combined libraries of the world couldn't hold the records of everything that Jesus did; yet, God has given us everything that we *need* to know in this Book. *Everything* you need for life and godliness is in the Scriptures! The Apostle Peter wrote, "**According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness.**" Brethren, cling to this Book! Read it. Cherish it. Live it.

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning, I would ask this question: Have *you* believed on the Lord Jesus Christ? You have studied through this Gospel of John; but have you *believed* the message of this Book? When I say "Have you believed," I do not mean, "Do you intellectually accept the facts of who Jesus is, and of what He did?" I mean, "Have you personally trusted Him to save you from your sin?" Has there been a time in your life when you admitted to Him that you are an undone sinner, and that you need what He did for you on the cross? If you have never received God's gift of salvation, I urge you to do so!

If you know Christ as Saviour already, I would ask this: How much do you love Him? Are you allowing Christ to lead you from one plain of love to another—from *phileo* love to *agape* love? Are you proving your love for Him with implicit obedience? Are you willing to follow Him anywhere—even unto death? If your love should be lacking, why don't you talk to Him about it this morning, and ask Him to help you

to be like Peter, and John, and all the other Apostles, who followed Him from the Sea of Galilee to the ends of the earth?