

Do You Love Me?  
John 21

The gospel of John is written so that you may believe in the deity and person and work of Christ; it's the highpoint of the gospel (20:30-31). It should be the end of the gospel, but it's not.

From that high point, you come to John 21 that finishes like a thud off a high cliff. It's a jolt. Why do we have to go back to Peter and this "disappointing narrative." Do we really need this? Can't we go into Acts and see the Ascension and the day of Pentecost and *that* Peter? Why do we need this? Because the gospel ends up in clay pots. It's for us. This has to be part of the story.

We have been to the mountain and we have seen majestic glory by a more sure word even than what Peter saw at the Mount of Transfiguration. We too have been witnesses to His glory and the gospel rests with us and we are to carry it forward even in our weakness.

Peter did enough to lose his ordination seminaries.

The thud takes part in the first three words of John 21 — *after these things...* All the men in these verses are the guys from the fishing business — the Galilean fishermen (plus Thomas). The Lord had told them to go to Galilee (Mt. 28:16) to go to a mountain and wait for him there to receive further orders. In a predictable and impulsive move, Peter goes back to his old life and his old business.

How do we know that? They got into *the* boat — they went back to their own area and their own boat; it's a boat big enough for all of them; they took nets in the fishing boat. Peter was dressed for work. This wasn't recreation; it was work. Why does Peter do this? Hasn't he seen the risen Christ? Why is he going back to fishing? He had absolutely no confidence in himself; he was a proven failure.

He had overestimated his wisdom and underestimated temptation and made a foolish boast in the upper room that led to blatant betrayal. At that point in the story we don't know if he's any different than Judas. He was a history of failure and inadequate. "I can't do this ministry, but *I can fish*. Let's go back to fishing."

Verse 4. When Jesus said, "You don't have fish..." He meant, "You *can't* fish — I control the fish." And then they hauled in a great haul of fish when He commanded them to fish from the right side of the boat — the final miracle in John.

Peter doesn't help the men pull in the fish — he just dives into the water!

They couldn't get the fish into the boat — they had to drag it to the shore about 100 yards.

The lesson of this account is, “You can’t fish anymore when I control the fish... You can’t fish for fish when I have called you to fish for men.”

Then Jesus moves to restore all the men. Are you surprised that the Lord would restart with these men? Here’s the good news — that’s all He has to work with: clay pots with unclean lips. How does Jesus disciple a disciple? How does He restore a disobedient disciple? How does Jesus do biblical discipling? How does He recover them for usefulness? It must be a long and very complex process? It must take months, if not years. How does Jesus do it?

He asks him one question, three times. “Do you love me?”

There is no ambiguity in the question. There is no mystery. Do you love me?

Sanctification happens through the aggressive pursuit of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Your sanctification is directly tied to the pursuit of the glory of Christ. To restore Peter, Christ asked only one simple question. It wasn’t about service or obedience, but love. God has come to us in Christ and God wants us to love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength — with all our faculties. Cf. 1 Cor. 6:22 — if you are damned for not loving the Lord, then you are given eternity by loving the Lord.

“Do you love Me?”

The first question is “do you love me more than these (things)?” He’s not talking about the other men because they were as guilty as Peter; He’s asking if Peter loves Jesus enough to deny himself and give up the things of the world.

Peter must have been sorrowful. He said, “You know I love you (φιλέω).” He declined to use the noblest word for love (ἀγαπάω) and he also appealed to Jesus’ omniscience and knowledge of him. He couldn’t say, “Look at my life...of course I love you...” He had to appeal to Jesus’ knowledge of him even if it wasn’t obvious.

And the answer is, “You’re accepted. Feed my lambs.” The lambs belong to Jesus and He’s turning them over to Peter. Peter is restored to the ministry with a love that isn’t visible to anyone except Jesus in His omniscience. Cf. Jn. 17:11 — Peter entrusted the disciples to the Father when He went to the cross and then turned the sheep to Peter’s care.

So Jesus asked a second time and then a third time. Do you even love me (φιλέω) — do you even have strong affection for me? This had to really hurt. It probes into Peter’s heart. Peter was grieved — a deep pain in the heart. It wasn’t because it was the third time. It was because the third time the Lord questioned even the love he thought he could get by with. Peter said, “You know that I love you.”

This is a lot like Isaiah 6. It’s always clay pots. With all our flaws and imperfections, He sends us because He knows the love is real. Shepherding is merely extension of love into serving love.

This love has a cost. Verse 18. This is a promise of Peter's martyrdom. And this was the best news Peter ever heard in his life. It meant that Jesus was telling him, "the next time you face death, you will not deny me." That steeled him for the rest of his ministry!

This is like Lk. 14:26.

Do you love Me? Do you love Me enough to take up a cross, if that's what I ask?

This is a love that also demands obedience (v. 19) — *follow Me*. And after Peter raises the question about John, Jesus says, "That's irrelevant — And after Peter raises the question about John, Jesus says, "That's irrelevant — *you* follow Me."

The Lord will accept less than a perfect love, but not less than a real love.

Peter learned his lessons. Look at 1 Peter 5. Peter has become the shepherd telling us to shepherd the flock — using the same words that Jesus used with Him.

“Greet one another with a kiss of love.  
Peace be to you all who are in Christ.” [1 Pet 5:14 NAS95]