

Peter lovest thou me

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Date: 21 April 1985

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the passage we read in John's Gospel, John chapter 21, and especially verse 17. The third time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.

Jesus said, feed my sheep. It was said of Jesus that no one had ever spoken like this man.

And as you see, Jesus dealings with various people, those who opposed him as well as with his friends. We see how true that was, and in some very surprising ways.

Because Jesus said some things and struck some attitudes that we would reckon to be very difficult in another person.

[1 : 14] For instance, there is the almost constant attitude that he takes it for granted that what people think of him is important.

Now, of course, we know that in any ordinary, normal person, such an attitude would be considered a fault. If any one of us goes around giving the impression that we want other people to think we're very special and it's important what they think of us, then, well, other people tend to think we're a bit affected, if not conceited.

But such an idea can't be entertained concerning the Lord Jesus, because in every other way he appears to be self-effacing and self-sacrificing.

Yet, here we have him specifically saying to Peter, do you love me? In other places, he asks such questions as, who do men say that I am?

And who do you say that I am? Also, he said, on another occasion, do you believe in the Son of Man? Speaking to a blind man, he had healed.

[2 : 43] Do you believe in the Son of Man? Referring to himself. Constantly, Jesus is drawing people's attention to himself. Now, the only explanation of that fact is that it is out of concern for people that he does so.

It simply does not fit the character of our Lord Jesus to explain it away as some kind of conceit.

It can only be explained on the basis that our Lord Jesus Christ himself gives, and that is that he is a unique person.

And the very destiny, the very salvation of men, depends on what they think of Christ. We cannot eradicate this idea out of Christianity and leave Christianity unchanged.

Many people will try to have a Christianity that has Christ merely as a good teacher or as a good man or a great prophet.

[4 : 07] But Jesus does not allow us to entertain just that idea concerning him. Either he is a very evil person seeking to draw people to worship himself, or he is someone deranged in mind, or he is what he claimed to be, the Son of God, the one sent by God into this world to be the one to remove our sin and therefore our attitude to him is absolutely crucial concerning eternal life, concerning our everlasting destiny.

So as we consider these words, these questions that Jesus addresses to Peter, let us bear in mind that that is there in the background, if not in the forefront of what is happening, Jesus demonstrating quite clearly that although he is the most humble man who has ever lived, yet it is crucial that Peter has the right attitude towards him, that Peter loves him, that Peter trusts him.

Well then, I would like to look with you at the background to what takes place here between Jesus and Peter, because of course, as we know, this question of Jesus to Peter does not come out of the blue.

It has a very long history behind it, and we're familiar, no doubt, with that history. Of course, it goes right back to the time when Jesus was talking at the time of the Last Supper, talking concerning what was going to happen, that he was going to be betrayed, and that he was going to die, and he was talking about his disciples all leaving him.

The shepherd was going to be struck, and the sheep would be scattered, he said. And there it was that Peter, impetuous as ever, comes forward to say, no, he wouldn't leave Jesus.

[6 : 43] And we shouldn't try to put any kind of false interpretation upon Peter's words. I think it's quite apparent that Peter meant those words when he spoke them.

He spoke out of the warmth of his heart and his love to the Lord Jesus, that he would never leave Jesus. And he went so far as to say, even though all the others would leave Jesus, he would not leave Jesus.

He was prepared, even he said, to die with him. And then it was that Jesus, Jesus very solemnly, but also very gently, warned Peter that he, in fact, was going to deny him.

That before the cock crew, that is before the dawn, before morning, he was going to deny that he ever knew Jesus. And he was going to do so, not just, as it were, as a slip, but he was going to do it three times, underlining that it was a deliberate denial, a deliberate disowning of Jesus.

Well, then we know how events proceeded, events proceeding more quickly and perhaps more frighteningly than Peter had ever imagined. And it came to the time when, indeed, Peter did forsake Jesus and run away from him.

[8 : 16] Although it must be said that Peter it was who attempted, in his own way, to try to defend the Lord Jesus. Because Peter, we're told, is one of those who had a sword.

And he attempted to defend Jesus by attacking those who came to arrest Jesus. to the extent of hitting someone on the head and cutting off his ear.

But when he saw that this was not Jesus' way, and when he saw that there was absolutely no hope, he too turned tail and fled.

Then, of course, we come to the bit that we read of also where Jesus is being tried, if we can call it a trial, that travesty of justice that took place in the high priest's house.

Peter was there in the courtyard warming himself by the fire. And we read there how three times in different ways and to different people, Peter denied that he knew Jesus, that Jesus' words came true to the letter in what he had predicted concerning Peter.

[9 : 27] and Peter, we're told, went out and wept bitterly. A tremendous blow had been struck to Peter, to Peter's own personality and to his own faith and to everything.

It was as if his whole world had crumbled about because he had trusted, perhaps, we may say, more deeply and more strongly than maybe some of the others.

And so, his disillusionment, it would seem, now seemed to be even greater. And particularly, when he had made such great boasts concerning his commitment to Christ and how he had fallen very low from these proud boasts.

Well then, that is something of the background to this question that Jesus is asking Peter here. But of course, between those events, there come the great climactic events of Jesus' life.

His trial, his being tortured by the soldiers, being scourged, and of course, finally being crucified to death.

[10 : 48] Then, his rising again from the dead. And here we come now to one of those appearances to his disciples.

And in this appearance to his disciples, which was back at the Sea of Galilee, back in their own home area, he singles out Peter particularly for attention because Peter needs this restoring word from our Lord.

And so we see then next Jesus' care in restoring Peter. Jesus does not consider it as something trivial that Peter has denied him.

But he is very careful as he speaks to Peter, as he deals with him, that Peter will be very well aware of how serious his fall has been, but yet, of course, also, that there is restoration for him.

Now, these words should come to us, to all of us here tonight, as tremendously encouraging words because what true Christian cannot sympathize with Simon Peter?

[12 : 08] every one of us who has professed faith in Jesus Christ, we know that we have fallen just as much as Peter did.

Perhaps not such an outwardly dramatic way in which Peter did, but the same kind of sin and failure is there in our experience and in our personal history.

Perhaps even to the extent of being very self-confident at times in our Christianity and in our witness to Jesus Christ, and then being brought very low by discovering that when the crunch came, when we were in a tight corner, when we were perhaps all alone, with no other Christians around, it became very difficult, it became impossible to bear witness to Christ, and either by our silence, or perhaps by our deliberate impression given by what we said, we have disowned Christ.

So as we look at what Jesus says to Peter here, and how he deals with him, every one of us as Christians can surely identify with what's going on, and draw strength and help for ourselves from these healing words of Jesus to Peter.

It's particularly important that a Christian should not go around with a great burden of failure and of guilt upon his shoulders.

[13 : 55] And perhaps a great deal of our uselessness as Christians comes from such a reason. We may feel like failures, and we may so carry about our burden of failure that we become next to useless in Christ's service.

We come to think of ourselves as failures, and then we are failures. Now the Lord Jesus Christ here very carefully and very deliberately restores Peter and restores him to a position of great authority and of great helpfulness to others, as he himself predicted, because he said that when Peter was restored, he would be the one that would strengthen his brothers.

And that's the way, in fact, it turned out. But Peter had to have these words of restoration from Jesus Christ to be able to be useful in his service.

So then, look at the careful way in which Jesus restored him. Even down to the very smallest details, Peter had denied Jesus three times, and denied him three times publicly.

And Jesus here, very carefully and very deliberately, asks Peter, not once, not twice, but three times, to publicly own him as the one that he loved above all else.

[15 : 36] Now, that was not only very careful on Jesus' part, but it was very kind to Peter, because it gave him the opportunity of putting right what he had done wrong.

Now, that was a glorious privilege in itself. Not that he could ever recall those words, those oaths and curses by which he disowned Jesus Christ.

That could never be recalled, nor could that harm ever be undone. But he was given this great privilege of, in a way, acting out what might have been, and doing so not as an act, but doing so genuinely with all the true and deep fervor of his personality.

That he was privileged by Jesus to make that profession of him there by the seaside in Galilee. and Peter, of course, as we know, went on to have many and glorious opportunities to testify publicly to his belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and as the Son of God.

We notice Jesus' kindness also in another way. we notice it in the very words that he chooses. Now, I know that some commentators differ as to the right interpretation of what Jesus is actually saying here.

[17 : 22] But it appears to me, almost self-obvious, that if Jesus uses different words and doesn't repeat exactly the same question each time, it would seem that there ought to be some explanation for that.

And I think there is a reasonable explanation for it. What I'm talking about only becomes apparent if we have a translation that is trying accurately to translate what the actual Greek words are.

Because there are two different Greek words that are used here for love. Where we have in the New International Version here, where we have the expression, do you truly love me?

That is the great, strong New Testament word for love. That is the great seeking of the highest good of another person.

The kind of love that God has shown to us in sending Jesus Christ into this world for the highest good of sinners, to redeem them and to bring them into his family.

[18 : 34] love for God. It is the kind of word that is used of our love for God.

It is the kind of word that is used of our love for our fellow men at its highest extent. This God-like, Christ-like love. Now that's the word that Jesus begins with.

God-like love but it would seem that Peter feels that he is not capable of attaining to any kind of boast about such a love.

And he uses what we may call the slightly lesser word. He uses the word that expresses the love of affection, the love of friendship.

Again, a very strong word but not quite as strong in the New Testament context as the word agape, the first word.

[19 : 40] But this word, philia, the love of friendship, the love of affection, is also a very strong and attractive word. And Peter feels that he can, yes, he can attain to that.

He can say, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He's not making any kind of boast about how great or how strong his love is.

Do we see in that way how Peter has changed? Maybe a sadder but certainly a wiser man. And we notice as we run through the questions that for the third time Jesus says to Simon, do you love me?

In other words, he, as it were, comes down to Peter's own vocabulary. He comes down to Peter's own level and he uses the same word.

And he says, very well, Peter, you're not going to be making any boasts about how great is your love to me. But, do you love me?

[20 : 53] Do you have that love, that affection, that warmth towards me, that trust in me? Do you have that? And we read that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time, do you love me?

In other words, Peter perhaps felt almost as if Jesus was questioning even that love. But, Jesus was doing it for his own good.

He was seeking Peter to really examine himself and to see indeed if he did love Jesus, if he did have that, even that affection for Jesus.

And Peter was able to say in these terms, yes, Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you. God's love you.

And so, Peter's response to that examining, questioning of Jesus is also very helpful for us because Peter obviously is still grieving, he recognizes the harm that he has done, he recognizes his own sin, but yet, in these answers to the Lord Jesus, he demonstrates his trust in Christ and his love of him.

[22 : 20] We notice, for instance, how he has belief in the omniscience of Jesus. He says to him, you know all things. Peter, who had been the first to boldly say, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

That basic faith has not departed from Peter and he demonstrates it here in a very practical way. He says to Jesus, Lord, you know, you know all things.

No ordinary man can know the things that you know. You know how we tick, you know what's going on in our minds. You know all things, you know that I love you.

So Peter here indeed is responding to that very careful, very deliberate, yet very loving approach of the Lord Jesus Christ to restore him.

Now all these facets of this conversation between Peter and Jesus have great import for ourselves. If we have been considering ourselves in the same kind of position as Peter, having failed the Lord Jesus and perhaps having a sense of our own failure, then these words surely come to us as tremendously encouraging.

[23 : 51] First and foremost, the Lord Jesus Christ did not write Peter off as a complete failure. We know that this world can be very harsh.

We know that in this world that if you don't match up to the expectations that are required, whether it's in school or university sitting exams or whether it's a job or whatever it is, you don't match up to the expectations, well, it's not often that you really get a second chance or much of a chance to redress the balance.

Very often this world can be harsh in its judgment, but the Lord Jesus Christ is never harsh and he's never too ready to spring to conclusion.

The Lord Jesus Christ had picked Peter, had chosen him and loved him and that love was not going to change because of Peter's failure at a certain point in his life, but rather it was going to be taken by the Lord Jesus Christ unmolded as part of the experience that he wanted Peter to have.

That Peter was yes going to continue to have his great strength. He was going to continue to be bold and strong minded and strong willed and yes maybe also even impetuous.

[25 : 21] But these things were going to be mellowed a bit and also he was going to have a wisdom and perhaps a compassion and a greater depth of awareness of the failures of others than he might have had before.

the Lord Jesus certainly did not write Peter off but he was rather restoring him and enabling him to come to a new and higher awareness of Christ's love for him.

So if we may have a sense of failure we also ought to have the knowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for us in that sense of failure in our awareness of our own sin and his desire is for us to come to him to come to his word to be examined yes penetratingly by his word but to come through that examination of his word and to be encouraged by it and to discover that yes we do have a basic love of Jesus Christ that nothing can ever shift and that is what he desires of us and that in the last analysis is all he desires of us and that is the foundation upon which he builds and so he received Peter simply on that basis that Peter loved him and he accepts you and he accepts any one of us on that basis and may

I say this at this point that these words are not just relevant to the Christian that is the basis upon which he accepts everyone a simple childlike loving trust in him that is the way we come to him in the first place and that is the way we come to him again and again to be restored to be restored to be re-equipped to go on in the Christian life and then finally we have to notice Jesus command to Peter Jesus command to Peter is again repeated three times and in slightly different ways we have first of all in verse 15 feed my lambs then verse 16 take care of my sheep and then finally feed my sheep now in these three slightly different ways

Jesus is certainly stressing to Peter that he is not just being restored to a sort of very menial position if you like but he is being restored as one who is a teacher one who is a pastor one who is a shepherd under the great shepherd the Lord Jesus Christ and that tells us something about the greatness of Jesus restoring love to those who stray and sin and fail his desire for us is not that we simply be taken back as the prodigal son said as one of his hired servants but we are restored completely and restored and brought on even to a higher level than we were before Peter here is being given the great privilege of being a shepherd under the good shepherd the

[29 : 14] Lord Jesus Christ over his people and he stresses different aspects of that work when he talks about the lambs talks about maybe those who are young in age talks maybe about those who are young in Christian experience those who are immature just like lambs and he talks also about taking care of or shepherding the sheep and he talks about feeding the sheep too all these different aspects of the work that were being committed to Peter shown that he was to be a pastor over others so that Jesus was showing to him that the experience he had gone through although he had been wrong he had been sinful yet it was not a negative experience in the last analysis it was something that the Lord Jesus

Christ could use and something out of which Jesus could bring Peter to be of even more usefulness in his service he was now hopefully going to be an even better pastor than perhaps he had been before because he was going to be aware of the weaknesses the temptations the dangers that the lambs and the sheep were going to have to face and so the Lord Jesus is saying to us tonight don't be thrown down by whatever may have happened to you in the past or what you may be going through at this present time with regard to a sense of failure or inadequacy a sense of your own guilt and sin rather he is saying I want to restore you I want to forgive that sin and for you to recognize that the sin is forgiven and

I want you to view what has happened positively I want you to recognize that ultimately for the Christian there is no negative thing yes there is sin and it can never be called by any other name but all things work together for good to those who love me Jesus is saying so tonight he wants us to have an awareness that we may return to him on the same basis on which we came in the first place our love of him and he wants to restore us and restore us to a position of Christian usefulness how many stunted dwarfed lives there are in the Christian church and particularly in our own land today there are many Christians in this country if a political party or any other organization had even probably a tenth part of the number of

Christians that are in this country they would be delighted but we're not very effective we're not very effective as the salt of the earth and the light of the world is it because our Christian growth is stunted we're underdeveloped we've got a sense of failure and a kind of defeated attitude even before we begin when the Lord Jesus Christ is wanting us to recognize that that is not his way he wants us to get to grips with what we have done wrong to confess it and to have done with it and to accept his full and free forgiveness and to realize that he is wanting us to be useful in his service he's not wanting half hearted Christians Christians that make some kind of profession of faith in him but want to live a very quiet and inactive kind of

Christian life he wants Christians who face up to their failures their sins and are restored by him to full usefulness of service that's what he desires and that's what he's saying to us tonight by this restoration of Peter because if Peter could be restored and if Peter could go on to be as useful as he became in the early Christian church then what one of us can dare to say to the Lord Jesus I am beyond hope you cannot restore me you cannot make me useful the Lord Jesus Christ has all authority given to him in heaven and in earth and he has the authority on earth to forgive sins and he is the great shepherd of the sheep who decides and chooses how the gifts that he has purchased for us are to be distributed and used by every

[34 : 44] Christian and every Christian has got gifts and abilities to be used in his service and what he's wanting us to do is to use those things to his glory for our own good and the great strengthening and encouraging of the church and the salvation of sinners around us that is his desire and that is his command to us this evening let us pray our loving heavenly father we bless you for the great love demonstrated in these words we've been considering very briefly gracious lord we ask that these words may indeed rest in our own hearts and minds words that would penetrate words that would heal words that would restore because they are not just empty words they are your word and they come to us with all your authority enable us not to be unbelieving and resist your gracious word that enable us to take it and receive it believe it and act upon it we pray gracious lord a blessing for those unable to be with us tonight especially those who are ill or housebound in some other way lord care for them and help them and encourage them and bless us as a whole congregation to be concerned for those who may be weaker in any particular way physically morally or spiritually that we might have that concern that a body has each member caring for other members lord forgive us for our failures in these and other ways to demonstrate your love in this world we ask these things in Jesus name and for his sake amen to please to gather