

John 21:13-19

*<sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.*

13 Read Luke 17:7-10; 22:27 John 13:1-5

*<sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

14 The first two times were in the upper room while they were hiding from the authorities.

*<sup>15</sup> 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, "Feed my lambs."*

15 The conversation began while they were sitting around a charcoal fire (anthracite- John 21:9). The only other time that word was used was when Peter was in Caiaphas' courtyard and three times denied that he knew Jesus. Now, around a similar charcoal fire, warming themselves from the cool of the early morning (19:18), Jesus is giving Peter three chances to reaffirm his love.

Jesus asked Peter, "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*" I do not think Jesus was asking if Peter loved him more than the other disciples. Jesus had rebuked them for comparing themselves and wanting to be superior to the others (Luke 9:46-48). He is not starting a "who loves Me most" competition. He had to be referring to the fish. Do you love me more than these fish, the security they bring, the smell of the lake, the thrill of a big catch? And Peter said, "*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*" He said to him, "*Feed my lambs.*" Jesus asked, "Do you agape me more than the fish?" Agape is God's kind of love, a love that is a choice, a love that does not demand anything in return.<sup>i</sup>

Recent commentators downplay the difference in the words used for "love" here in this passage (*agape* and *phileo*), pointing out that John seems to use them almost interchangeably. I side with the older commentators in this instance. I cannot imagine that John, who has chosen his words so carefully to this point, would just casually use two different words for "love" in the same verse without having some purpose. He is recalling the actual conversation that must have been recounted to him by Peter. Peter backslid around a charcoal fire and now Jesus is helping him "forward slide" with that memory fresh in his mind around a similar fire. The two events were probably just a little more than a week apart.

"So, Peter, do you agape me?" Jesus asked. Peter had been quick to make claims in the past. He was the one who said that if all others deserted Jesus, he would never desert Him (Matthew 26:33), but he did. For us to understand the anguish Peter was feeling, we must understand the relationship of a disciple and his rabbi. A rabbi was said to be like a father to his disciples. One teaching declared that if your rabbi and your father were both held for ransom, you should ransom your rabbi first. Such was the first century relationship between a rabbi and disciple, which gives us insight into the turmoil Peter

felt as he had to honestly answer his Rabbi's questions about his heart. When Peter failed, he went out and wept bitterly. He is not as confident as he once was.

Jesus is asking if Peter's love goes beyond selfish demands to an unconditional choice. Peter humbly responded, "You know I *phileo* you." In other words, "You know I love you like a brother." It was not so much a choice as it was their time together had bound them like brothers, was the sense of Peter's reply. You are stuck with your brothers. Peter knew he could not just walk away and go back to his old life. It was not the same. Nothing was the same, especially his self-confidence.

We often wish we could go back to a time when things were easier, less complicated, but time marches on. God is moving us forward, stretching our faith, and this often happens through difficulty and pain. Peter could never go back to the old days before Jesus' call on his life. Truth had been revealed. Commitments had been made. It is impossible to turn back the clock. It is impossible to forget the denials.

Jesus responded, "*Feed my lambs.*" Jesus just fed them physically, but with spiritual significance. Now, He is asking Peter to express the brotherly love he has for Jesus by feeding the young believers spiritually. This is a beautiful picture of the grace of God. After three denials of a relationship with Jesus, one of those with cursing, and unable to say that he loves Jesus with an unselfish, intentional love, Jesus calls Peter again to serve Him as His disciple. "You failed! Okay, now let Me work through you!"

You see, it is not when we get our seminary degree that God calls us. It is not when we have a certain amount of experience. It is when we realize we cannot do what God asks of us. It is when we realize that we do not deserve to be chosen, and when we see we are incapable of living out the mission. Simon Peter did not respond by starting The Simon Peter School of Shepherding.

I knew I was called from the time I was a youth, but I was re-called after I had miserably failed and had lost all confidence that I could serve God. It was when I felt that I should not be called that the "re-call" came loud and clear (Isaiah 50:10).

Do not think that you need to be a missionary or a pastor to be called. God calls people to represent Him in every walk of life. The call always includes feeding lambs in one way or another. It may be a distraught co-worker that needs a shoulder to cry on and a verse from Scripture to cling to, or a business contact who you can befriend and share how Jesus has made a difference in your life. It is being Christ like in your business dealings or the way you serve others until someone asks why you are different. It is offering to pray when you see the hurt in someone's eyes. It is being available for God to touch a life through you anywhere you happen to be.

You might say, "Lord, I just cannot do that." Then you are ready to be called. Congratulations! That is right where you should be. It must be His life in you. It must be the power of the Holy Spirit. You must be totally dependent on Him. If you said, "Oh yeah! I can do that!" You are not ready! That is confidence in the flesh, and it will not bear lasting fruit (John 15:5).

The first time Jesus called Peter, Peter asked Jesus to go away because Peter recognized his own sin and Jesus' holiness (Luke 5:8). This time Peter is aware of the limitations of his love, and yet, Jesus' grace and mercy invite him to be one who feeds

the lambs. Do you see the character of Jesus? He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).

*16 He said to him 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, "Tend my sheep."*

*16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."(NIV)*

16 The second time Jesus asked the same question, and Peter responded in the same way. This time Jesus said, *"Take care of my sheep."* Feed the lambs and care for the more mature ones, the sheep. He is asking Peter to be a shepherd. Jesus had referred to Himself as a shepherd. He is asking Peter to be like the Lord to them for *"the Lord is my shepherd."* (Psalm 23:1) Jesus is reiterating the call, *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you!"* John 20:21 Grace calls the ones who fail, to feed and lead, because they will be totally dependent on Jesus and therefore most like Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

*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 everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."*

17 Finally, Jesus asked if Peter loved (phileo) Him like a brother. Jesus acquiesced to Peter's commitment level. If your heart can only say your love commitment comes to this point, fine. Jesus will accept that, but thank God He will not leave it there. As we see His love more clearly, the love in our hearts will grow into His kind of unconditional love. The question is still, "Do we love Jesus more than things?" If we love Him, we will focus on serving others. We will care for lambs and feed the sheep. We will represent Jesus to others who desperately need Him (1 John 4:12).

This was not a new teaching from Jesus. Before His death He told the disciples that if anyone loved Him, they would obey His teaching (John 14:23). What did He teach? Love God with your all and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30). What was His command? <sup>34</sup> *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.* John 13:34 (ESV) The "as I have" should catch our attention. He loved us to the point of laying down His life for us! That is not the contemporary American culture, "What's in it for me?" It is the costly, messy, self-denying, time consuming job of getting involved in others' lives to love them with God's love. It is not a quick formula that fulfills your obligation.

Three denials from Peter were given three opportunities to confess his love. That came with three reminders from Jesus that He will work through him to meet the needs of those around him, for what He commands us to do He will certainly empower. Does He not do the same with us (Ephesians 6:9)? How many times have you denied Him in some way? And yet, He graciously gives us the opportunity to confess our love for Him and serve others. He just will not give up on us! Thank God!

*18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." 19 (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."*

18, 19 Peter had lost confidence in his ability to stand with Jesus when the going got tough. Jesus is now telling Him that it is okay. Jesus will help him to the end. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Just follow and you will be able to face what you failed. "Follow me!" It is the call of a rabbi to his new disciple. Start afresh. His mercies are new every morning!

Tradition tells us that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome. The apocryphal book, *The Acts of Peter*, tell of Peter fleeing the persecution after Nero's fire in Rome. He is said to have met Jesus on the road as he fled Rome, but Jesus was going into Rome. Peter asked where He was going (*Quo vadis*). Jesus answered, "To be crucified again." This gave Peter the courage to continue his ministry and face martyrdom. The account is a legend, but it may have some basis in truth.

None of us can honestly say if we would stand up for Jesus if it meant a painful death. We would like to think we would, but we can never be sure. And yet, just as Jesus helped Peter to do what he had failed at before, He will surely help us with as well. Sometimes the dying daily can be harder than the final decision (Matthew 10:38). Jesus will help us glorify God in that regard as well if we will look to Him alone for the strength and direction we need.

Peter used to do what he desired and go where he pleased. That would no longer an option. No more fishing trips on a mere whim. The Master is back. He is a disciple, a servant. He thought that was true the first time the Lord said, "Follow me!" It was not. There was still a little, "What's in it for me?" in Peter's heart. Now with this "re-call", so to speak, this "forward slide", Peter will give up his plans, dreams, even desires and truly follow Jesus. The ultimate expression of that will be his death.

We can all be like Peter, giving up our freedom, our grip on the steering wheel of life and let God take over. It is the beginning of a fantastic adventure filled with joy, meaning and purpose, along with many trials (Acts 14:22).

Questions:

- 1 What does the charcoal fire remind us of?
- 2 What are "these" in verse 15.
- 3 What was Jesus' word for love? Peter's?
- 4 What are the "fish" in your life?
- 5 When is a person ready to be God's instrument?

6 What are Jesus' commands?

7 What changed in Peter's life? Yours?

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<sup>i</sup> This paragraph is from my sermon The Last Breakfast