

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

“Do You Love Me?”
John 21:14-17

Intro: If each of us here today, as born-again believers who have been bought with a price, washed in the blood, adopted into the family of God; if we really knew how sinful we actually are, we wouldn't always be so shocked or offended by our own failures. Most of us can't comprehend the depths of our own depravity so we are shocked, especially when we fall into moral sin or by our surprising tendency to deny our Lord.

When we sin in those ways, the devil comes and begins to whisper in our ear. He says that because we sinned, we've lost out on our chance for a successful, happy Christian life and might as well go on sinning. Like most of the devil's comments this is a lie. Even though we as believers may sin, we still don't forfeit our chance for a full Christian life, nor can we go on sinning. The Christian way is that of repentance and restoration. This is the whole point of John's account of Peter's restoration by Jesus. Peter had failed Jesus in the hour of His greatest need. He abandoned Him and then doubled down on his sin with a 3-fold denial that he'd ever known Him. Yet Jesus still loved Peter, and Peter knew that he loved Jesus.

How did it come to this? To properly understand the restoration of Peter, we need to understand how Peter fell. He fell because of self-confidence, which was only intensified when Jesus pointed out his weakness. It started in the upper room when Jesus was speaking about love. He had given His new commandment—“Love one another. As I have loved you, that you also love one another” (13:34) Instead of this humbling Peter, it only got him to thinking how much he really loved Jesus. So later, when Jesus mentioned His going away and that the disciples wouldn't be able to follow Him, Peter correctly sensed He was speaking of His death. Peter then confidently, and wrongly, declared “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for Your sake” (13:37).

Jesus then rebukes Peter by challenging his declaration of loyalty: “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times” (38).

Peter barely heard anything Jesus said in the upper room after that. He certainly didn't ask any more questions, though he'd been quite inquisitive earlier in the evening. It's now Thomas and Philip who ask the questions. Peter was probably stunned by Jesus' prophecy and was probably telling himself, "He's wrong. He has no right to think so little of me or to say that in front of the others. I will never deny Him, no matter what anyone else does."

If this all sounds like so much speculation, just remember that this subject came up again after they left the upper room and were on the way to Gethsemane. In fact, the subject was raised by Peter, which shows he'd been stewing over Jesus' words awhile. Jesus spoke of the scattering of the disciples, His crucifixion, and how He would gather them together again after His resurrection. But Peter broke in to say, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble" (Mt 26:33). Jesus repeats His prophecy of Peter's denial. But Peter rejects it again, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (35). According to Luke, Jesus tells Peter Satan desires to sift him but that He had prayed for him that his faith should not fail. In spite of all this, Peter remained unconvinced and so went marching self-confidently on to his downfall. Each Gospel tells us that Peter denied Jesus 3 times.

14-17 – Let's set the scene. Over the last 2 studies we've seen this group of 7 disciples make an all night fishing trip that turns out to be nothing more than an exercise in futility. Morning arrives and they have nothing to show for all their efforts but blistered hands, sore backs, hungry bellies and tired eyes. Ministry can be tiring but ministry done in the power of the flesh is down right exhausting! When morning breaks, Jesus is walking on the shore and gives them some direction. They respond obediently and the blessings begin to flow. They immediately recognize that this is the Lord's doing and head into shore to meet Him, dragging a great haul of fish with them. They find fish and bread already on the fire but Jesus bids them to bring more fish. Now they're all sitting around the fire, munching of grilled fish and biscuits, mulling over what they had just experienced. The normally talkative disciples have nothing to say.

After their hunger is satisfied and their fatigue somewhat relieved; Jesus begins to speak. But, He doesn't address the group as a whole – He focuses solely on Peter. That may seem odd to us; there are 6 other close friends sitting around that fire but you only speak to one individual? First, we

must realize that Jesus didn't show up that morning just to entertain the disciples. No, He was there on important church business – to restore and re-commission Peter back into the ministry which he was originally called to, the ministry of “fishing” for men and women; the ministry of evangelism: carrying the good news of God's grace that provides salvation by the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it really shouldn't seem that odd to us that Jesus would single out Peter in the midst of a crowd. Is that not what He does to each one of us as we sit under the sound of His Word and are encouraged by it, or instructed, or challenged, or chastised? It doesn't matter if we are in a group of 20 or 2000, when the Lord speaks, He speaks directly to you. When the message hits home, you kind of forget about the crowd around you because the Holy Spirit is dealing with your heart specifically through the Word. That conversation can be a little unnerving, it can often be uncomfortable but; if you respond to the Holy Spirit with humility and obedience, you'll find forgiveness, peace or direction. In short, if you respond correctly to the application of the Word, you'll find relief. That's what Peter needs.

Luke 24:34 tells us that Jesus had already met with Peter alone on the day of His resurrection. We can only guess as to what they had discussed at that time but it most likely concerned Peter's denial of Him. If that's the case, why does Jesus bring it up again here? Why now? Even though Jesus had dealt with Peter's sin privately, it was still important for Him to restore Peter in the presence of the other disciples. Since Peter had denied the Lord publicly, it was necessary that there also be a public restoration. Sin should only be dealt with to the extent that it is known. It doesn't do a church any good to drag everyone's dirty laundry out all the time. Private sins should be confessed in private, public sins should be addressed in public. That's what Jesus is seeking to do right here for Peter.

This conversation has 3 parts to it. First, there's the Lord's question. Second, there's Peter's response. Third, there's the Lord's command. Again, we see Jesus asking questions and we must state again that He is not asking these to gain information. Jesus already knows the condition of both Peter's heart and mind and Peter was aware that He knew. The problem is; Peter doesn't know his own heart so the questions are asked to prompt self-examination.

First thing we notice about Jesus' question is the name He used to address Peter – Simon, son of Jonah... This was Peter's old name, the name he went by before he met Jesus. When Peter was brought to Jesus in **ch1**, He greeted Peter by saying, "You are Simon, the son of Jonah; thou shalt be called Cephas, which is translated, A stone" (**1:42**). It was a play on words. The old name meant "pebble" an unstable thing. But Jesus named Peter "a rock." He's saying He's going to turn Simon the jellyfish into a solid, courageous person. Now, in recalling this earlier incident, Jesus reverts back to the old name to remind Peter of his inherent weakness.

The next thing to notice about Jesus' question is the word He uses for love: agape. This word is used throughout the NT in relation to God's love. It denotes the unconditional, unmerited love of God – a 100% love. Another Greek word for love is phileo – a human love that expresses itself in friendship; brotherly love. Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him with a 100% love and He adds the comparison – "more than these." Is Jesus asking if Peter loves Him more than he loves the other disciples? Is He asking if he love Him more than his fishing nets and boat? Not likely.

Earlier, we read how Peter had declared that He loved Jesus more than the other disciples did and that he would prove it by dying either with Him or for Him if need be. He had made this profession just after Jesus had instructed the disciples to love one another with a 100% love. In light of this, Jesus is most likely inquiring what Peter had to say for himself now. He had once boasted that his love for Jesus was clearly 100% and was greater than the love the other disciples had for Him. Jesus just wants to know if that's a true assessment. "Do you love Me that way?"

What we see in Peter's response is a man sufficiently humbled by his denial of Jesus. Peter agrees with Jesus that he loves Him but he uses the Greek phileo to describe his love, a lesser love than agape. Peter has been greatly subdued. He's not saying he doesn't love Jesus; he does! But, he's no longer boasting of his love, he's not saying his love is greater than someone else's love. He's just saying that his heart is open to Jesus and thus, Jesus knows that he loves Him with the best love a sinful human being is capable of. Before, Peter thought Jesus' "knowledge" of him and his future was wrong. Now he appeals to that knowledge as the basis of his confidence.

The second time Jesus asks Peter this question, He uses the same word for

love (agape) but He graciously drops the comparison. “Peter, do you love Me with a 100% love?” “Yes, Lord, You know I love You with a lesser love.”

The third time the question is asked; Jesus comes down to Peter’s level and uses Peter’s word. “Do you love Me with a lesser, human love?” It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Ok, Peter, I know you’re not capable of the kind of love I have for you and you’re right to only offer what you’re able to do. But do you really love Me even on this level? Do you really love Me with this lesser, human love?” Peter, who still has no confidence in his ability even to see into his own heart, answers truthfully, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love you.” When Jesus then goes on to give His command it’s as much as saying, “OK, Peter, I can work with that, because I’m able to bring that limited, lesser love up to the height I desire, the height at which I have saved you and ordained you to function.”

Why did Jesus ask Peter 3 times about his love for Him? Obviously, because of Peter’s threefold denial. Peter had denied Jesus publicly 3 times. Now Jesus asks him to publicly affirm 3 times that he loves Him. Clearly, the third question hurt the most. Was Jesus cruel to badger Peter about this 3 times in front of the others? It certainly appeared to be painful to Peter. But, Jesus wasn’t being cruel – He was actually being kind. The cruel thing would have been to let the issue go on festering in Peter so that for the rest of his life, he and the others would continue to think he was somehow inferior and unworthy of the office to which he’d been called, even though he had repented.

The kind thing to do was press this public restoration so that, from then on, Peter and the others would know that Peter’s past failures were in the past and the Lord Himself had commissioned Peter to further service. This is why the Bible calls for confessing our sins. It’s not that God just wants to be cruel, though confession can be painful. The purpose is so that we can put the matter of a particular sin to rest and pick up and go on with Jesus.

There’s another aspect of Peter’s response that still needs to be considered. It’s his consistent appeal to Jesus’ knowledge. In each instance he answered Jesus’ question by affirming his love and then saying, “You know I love You.” Peter could have easily said, “I know I love You” but he had said something like that before and he’d been dead wrong. Clearly, there could no longer be any confidence in what Peter thought or knew. The only

confidence he could cling to was in Jesus' knowledge of him – warts and all!

Peter was weak and sinful. He knew this now. But Jesus had known this all along, as Peter was starting to realize. How could Peter be encouraged by Jesus' knowledge of his propensity for weakness and failure? It seems illogical, but this is the strength of one who has met Jesus and knows that he is loved by Him. Peter was a sinner, yes! But he was a forgiven sinner. So, though he was conscious of sin, Peter still knew that Jesus could look beneath the surface of his denial to see a heart that had been made new and truly loved Him.

We can have joy in God's omniscient knowledge of us! 1st) God knows the worst about us and still loves us! Nothing we will ever do, good or bad, will surprise Him for He already knows our beginning and our ending. In fact, the Bible clearly states that, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" ([Rom 5:8](#)). 2nd) Since God knows all things; He also knows the best about us, even if others don't. The other disciples may have doubted Peter faith and resolve but Jesus didn't. He knew better. He knew Peter's heart and love. No wonder Peter appeals to His knowledge here.

We should never assume to know our strength of faith or determination of heart. Our confidence must be in the fact that Jesus knows what's in our heart, He knows because He put it there. He knows what we are capable of. All we can appeal to is that He takes what we have to offer and makes it into something that will abound to His glory!

After each response from Peter, Jesus gives him a gracious command. It was gracious because Peter had been a leader and then had fallen. For Jesus to come to him mercifully and tenderly was the height of graciousness. Jesus could have relegated Peter to a lesser role in the disciple band but He didn't. Earlier, Jesus had called Peter to be an evangelist ("From now on you will catch men" [[Luke 5:10](#)]). Now He grants Peter the even greater responsibility of teaching those who have been caught. The imagery has changed from evangelism (catching fish) to pastoring (shepherding the flock). Peter is not only commissioned to feed the sheep (teach them the Word); he's also given the responsibility to care for (shepherd, pastor) the sheep.

What's the prerequisite for this service? What's the only acceptable motive

for leading and teaching others? It's not moral perfection in the teacher; if so, there'd be no teachers. It's not academic degrees. It's not a greater desire to "bring in Christ's kingdom," nor the ability to raise more money than others, or build bigger cathedrals. There's only one prerequisite, only one true motivation for service. It's love for Jesus that leads to a desire to serve Him. Jesus didn't ask Peter if he was sorry; He didn't force Peter to promise to never do it again. No, Jesus challenged Peter to love. This kind of humble, submitted love doesn't get wrapped up and pulled away by mystical experiences. This love cares for others. If we truly love Jesus, we'll love those Jesus died for and we'll do our best to serve them in love

When we are confronted by Jesus, He doesn't ask for obedience, or promises, or holy conduct or even repentance. When Jesus meets with us, all He asks for is our heart. If we give Him our heart, fully and completely, He knows that all these other good things will naturally follow. We will eventually become what He sees us being if we love Him.

It may seem redundant for Jesus to ask Peter if he loves Him 3 times but it wasn't. Nearly every time Jesus mentioned His forthcoming death; Peter would disagree and even argue with Him about it. When they came to arrest Jesus in the Garden, Peter tried to prevent it by wielding his sword. By his comments and actions, it's clear that Peter didn't want a crucified Lord. Yet, Jesus was crucified nonetheless. How did Peter's love stand in light of this difficult truth? Was he ready to love Jesus as He was and not as Peter wished Him to be? That was an important question that Peter had to face and answer

It's still an important question today that every person must answer. Your answer will determine you eternity. 😊