

209. The Gospel of John 21:15-17

Lessons in True Love-Part 3
A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
(2-12-23)

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We have come to the final chapter in John's Gospel—an 'epilogue' which John inserted so that his readers would know what happened to Peter after his denial of Jesus and how he was restored by the Lord to his apostleship.

But not only that, this chapter teaches us some very important lessons about true love (the love of God)—which can and should be applied to our marriages or to any other human relationship that we have as Christians.

I. True Love is not Words—it's a Commitment—v.1-14

II. True Love is not Feelings—it's Service—v.15-17

John 21:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said...

One author rightly pointed out something important—

"Certainly, the spiritual is more important than the physical, but caring for the physical can prepare the way for spiritual ministry. Our Lord does not so emphasize "the soul" that He neglects the body."

And that is certainly true—which is why Jesus fed hungry people with literal food so that they would be able to *hunger* (listen and 'digest') the spiritual food He was giving them in the way of God's Word.

This is something organizations that try to minister to the homeless do—they provide them with food so as to make them more open and willing to hearing the gospel (hungry stomachs will often drown out hungry hearts).

John 21:15a (NKJV)

¹⁵ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son of Jonah*, do you love Me more than these?"

Notice how Jesus dealt with Peter's failure *publicly*—right in front of the other disciples.

Remember that those other disciples were present in the upper room the night before Jesus' crucifixion and heard Peter promise the Lord that even though the other disciples failed to be loyal to Jesus—Peter assured Him that *his* love and commitment to Jesus was stronger than theirs was.

I think there's an important principle here that needs to be pointed out—*private* sin needs to be dealt with privately between the person and God—whereas *public* sin needs to be dealt with publicly.

As someone has rightly said—

"Peter and his Lord had already met privately and no doubt taken care of Peter's sins (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5), but since Peter had denied the Lord publicly, it was important that there be a public restoration. Sin should be

dealt with only to the extent that it is known. Private sins should be confessed in private, public sins in public. Since Peter had denied his Lord three times, Jesus asked him three personal questions. He also encouraged him by giving a threefold commission that restored Peter to his ministry."

→ Relate story of man confessing to a Christian woman in his church of his lust for her...

"So, when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" (v.15)

In asking Peter this question, Jesus was probably pointing to the other disciples—bringing up Peter's promise to Jesus in the upper room the night before His crucifixion:

Matthew 26:31–35 (NKJV)

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: '*I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.*'" ³² But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" ...

I believe that Peter was absolutely sincere when he made this promise to his Lord—and yet we all know that it was a promise he failed to make good on.

Putting confidence in your flesh will always result in failure—Matt.26:41.

Now, as we look at John 21:15-17 (which deals with Jesus' restoration of Peter)—it's interesting that Jesus asks Peter 3 times if he *loved* Him.

Why 3 times? —no doubt one for each of Peter's 3 denials of Jesus.

What's interesting to me is that Jesus didn't ask him—"Simon, are you sorry for what you did? "Simon, will you promise never to do it again?" "Simon, have you learned your lesson?"

No instead Jesus asked Peter 3 times if he loved Him—why?

Because the kind of loyalty and obedience the Lord wants from us, He wants based on love not on legalistic duty—"If you love Me keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

John 21:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"...

The Greek word for '**love**' that Jesus uses is 'agapao'—the verb form of 'agape.'

Agape is a word that's usually used in the NT to speak of God's love—a love that's deep, fervent and unconditional.

So, Jesus is asking Peter, "**Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me, deeply, fervently and unconditionally?"**

To which Peter responded—**"Yes, Lord; You know that I *love* You."** (v.15)

Now what you don't know from the English is that—Peter responds with the Greek word 'phileo' which is a word that is used for friendship love.

In other words, it's a word that means a '*fondness*' or '*affection*' kind of love.

So when Jesus asked Peter—**"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me, deeply, fervently and unconditionally?"**

Peter responds by saying, **"Yes, Lord; You know that I am *fond* of You."**

The question is—why didn't Peter respond with the *higher* word for love?

Didn't Peter really love Jesus deeply, fervently, and unconditionally?

I believe he did—and I further believe that Peter, with all of his heart, wanted to say, **"Yes, Lord I *agapao* You—I love you deeply, fervently and unconditionally"**—so why didn't he?

He didn't because—how could Peter say that to Jesus knowing he had, a few days earlier—denied even knowing the Lord 3 times—and this after he had promised the Lord that he would die before he would ever deny Him! Have you ever found yourself in Peter's place, where you blew it and wanted to tell the Lord with all your heart that you really do love Him fervently and deeply—but found it hard or impossible to say without feeling like a hypocrite?

And even though Peter's love was imperfect (as ours is as well)—Jesus still commissions him into the ministry when He said to him, **"Feed My lambs."** (1Cor.1:27-29)

Then in **verse 16** Jesus said a second time, **"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me deeply, fervently and unconditionally?"**

And the second time Peter responded, **"Yes, Lord; You know that I am *fond* of You."**

When Peter said that Jesus responded, **"Tend My sheep."** (The Greek word is *poimen*—the word we get 'pastor' from—a word that means to '*shepherd, watch over, protect*' etc.)

John 21:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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 all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep.

When Jesus said to Peter the third time, **"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"**—He used the word *phileo*—**"Peter, are you *fond* of Me?"**

Here Jesus comes down to Peter's level—and this really *devastated* Peter.

Jesus came down to Peter's level because—Peter would not rise to the Lord's level.

It's always a sad day when we force the Lord down to our level, rather than rising to His level—the level of total commitment.

The Lord will do His best for you on whatever level you choose to live—but He always desires to lift us to the highest level in our relationship with Him—this was reflected in Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian Christians:

Ephesians 3:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Until your life has experienced the total richness and fullness and glory that He wants you to have—the glory of just living and abiding in total, close fellowship with Him.

Not until then will you *really* ‘agape’ the Lord (*‘love Him deeply, fervently and unconditionally’*)—and not until then will you be *‘filled with all the fullness of God!’*

That said, it’s sad when we because of compromise and carnality are satisfied with living at a lower level of relationship with Jesus than a total, full on, madly in love with kind of relationship that allows us to enjoy Him and fellowship with Him to the fullest!

Casual Christianity has become a real problem in the Church today—where too many Christians just want to be *‘friends’* with Jesus (live at the level of friendship with Him) instead of making a full-on commitment to Him (as in marriage).

When Jesus said to Peter the third time, **“Simon, son of Jonah, are you fond of Me?”**—Peter, now a broken man, said, **“Lord, You know all things (not me), You know that I’m fond of You.”**

Peter is saying, *“Lord, I know my love for You isn’t all it should be—but please don’t question whether I have any love for You at all! Lord, I know my actions don’t show that I agapao You, but you know everything there is to know which includes the things in my heart—You know that I’m fond of You!—at least give me that!!”*

Peter appealed to the Lord’s omniscience and so must we—

1 John 3:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

Then Jesus said to Peter—**“Feed My sheep.” (v.17)**

Peter didn’t *‘feel’* (at that moment) he could say he truly loved Jesus deeply, fervently and unconditionally (he would be able to someday—verses 18 and 19).

Jesus essentially responded, **“Peter, true love for Me (and for others) is not expressed in feelings but in commitment, and service—if you truly love Me, feed and take care of My sheep.”**

We can say we love the Lord all we want but He wants us to demonstrate our love by loving people and taking care of them (pastor/sheep; parents/children etc.)—as Jesus said, *“Whatever you do for the least of these My brethren, you do for Me”*. (Matt. 25:40)

We can tell people we love them—but if we don’t show them love in tangible ways—what good is it—it’s just empty rhetoric.

1 John 3:16–18 (NLT)

¹⁶ We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our

brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.

Peter’s *feelings* were not to get in the way of his *responsibility* in doing what the Lord called him to do—in other words, he was not to focus on how he *felt* about the Lord but on his *service* for the Lord.

Too often we only serve the Lord when we *feel* like it—our feelings become the motivation for service instead of God’s agape love (which then becomes impossible to love your enemies—because you’ll never feel like it).

In the Christian life—love = commitment = service = feelings—not the other way around.

Let me end this message with a warning—true love isn’t feelings (as in loving your enemies) it’s service—but be careful that you don’t offer Jesus service instead of or in the place of true love either.

Revelation 2:1–4 (NKJV)

¹ “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write...² “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. ⁴ Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.

It seems that all of these positive works of service were being erased by one negative—they were going through the *motions*, but they had lost the emotion in their relationship with Jesus.

Their church was a well-oiled machine—but God doesn’t want ‘*machines*’ cranking out *emotionless* service—He wants service that’s born out of a deep love that His people (His Bride) have for Him!

Jesus said the greatest commandment is: “*That you love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength*”—not that you serve the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Look, love is manifested thru service—but service is not necessarily done in love. (Comment)

And notice He doesn’t say they lost their first love—He says they left their first love.

This was a conscious act of departing on their part that didn’t take place all at once—but like the slow drifting off course of a ship at sea—it happened slowly over time.

In Weymouth’s N.T. translation of this passage it reads—“*Yet I have this against you—that you no longer love Me as you did at first.*”

What is “*first love*”?—it is the passionate love for Jesus that often characterizes the new believer.

It is the “*I can’t think of anyone else*” kind of fervent love that newlyweds have for each other—in a word it’s “*honeymoon*” love.

And while it is true that married love deepens and grows richer over time—it is also true that ideally it should never lose the passion of those “*honeymoon days*.”

The word “**Ephesus**” means ‘darling’ or ‘desired one’—they were still desired by the Lord, but He was longer desired by them as at the beginning of their relationship with Him.

This also happened with Israel—a cooling of their love for the Lord that He laments thru the prophet Jeremiah—*“I remember how eager you were to please me as a young bride long ago, how you loved me and followed me even through the barren wilderness...”* (Jeremiah 2:2 NLT)

The worst thing that can happen to any relationship, whether you’re talking about your relationship with God or your spouse—is when you begin to take the other for granted.

The church at Ephesus fell into the trap of thinking that loveless service was enough to please the Lord.

It would be like a wife who says to her husband, *“I don’t love you, I have no feelings for you at all, but I’ll stay married to you and clean the house, wash your clothes, cook your meals...”*—what husband would be happy with a relationship like that?

I didn’t marry my wife so that I would have someone to cook my meals and clean my house—I can hire people to do those things.

I married my wife because I fell in love with her and she with me and now all the acts of service she does for me are special and beautiful because I know they are an expression of her love for me—but without the love they would be meaningless.

It’s obvious that Jesus feels that same way and wants more than service in our relationship with Him—He wants passion, fire—He wants honeymoon love!

Remember He is holding His church in His nail scarred hands which speak of the ultimate act of selfless love—to lay down your life for the person you’re in love with.

What kind of love are you giving Him in return?

Is it *‘loveless service’*—are you going thru the motions, but you’ve lost the emotion in your relationship with Him?

Truth be told—if Jesus asked you if you love Him, would you be forced to say to Him, *“I’m fond of You Jesus—but that’s the extent of my love for you.”*

All Christians love Jesus but not all Christians are ‘in love’ with Jesus—and there is a difference.

And so for many Christians, because their love for the Lord has cooled—they (like the Christians in Ephesus) have substituted service for loving passion thinking they were ‘interchangeable’.

How can you fall in love with Jesus? Start spending time with Him. And then pray. (Phil.2:13)

Let me close with a quote by one well-known pastor and author—

“Christians are called to serve, but it is all too easy in the everyday following of Christ to put our priority on service rather than on loving God. Techniques and methods can easily become our primary focus. To carry out our methods we need power, and instead of longing for and loving the Source of the power, we sometimes lust for power alone. Production or results or success then becomes the center of our thinking. Roy Hession in his beautiful little book *We Would See Jesus* says:

‘To concentrate on service and activity for God may often actively thwart our attaining of the true goal, God

Himself. At first sight it seems heroic to fling our lives away in the service of God and of our fellows. We feel it is bound to mean more to Him than our experience of Him. Service seems so unselfish, whereas concentrating on our walk with God seems selfish and self-centered. But it is the very reverse. The things that God is most concerned about are our coldness of heart towards Himself and our proud, unbroken natures. Christian service of itself can, and so often does, leave our self-centered nature untouched.... With those things hidden in our hearts, we have only to work alongside others, and we find resentment, hardness, criticism, jealousy, and frustration issuing from our hearts. We think we are working for God, but the test of how little of our service is for Him is revealed by our resentment or self-pity.... We need to leave our lusting for ever-larger spheres of Christian service and concentrate on seeing God for ourselves and finding the deep answer for life in Him.'

The inversion of life's priorities is a deadly trap, especially for those who take their Christianity seriously—both Christian workers and caring laymen—because they want their lives to count, to do something that will make a difference.

The fact is, God has always made the first priority clear. From earliest times he has been explicit, even in the *Shema* sung by ancient Israel:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength! (Deuteronomy 6:4–5)

Everything we have is to be devoted to loving him. This theme was extended and substantiated by the Lord Jesus himself when a clever lawyer asked him, thinking to trip him up, "*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*" To which Jesus answered, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and foremost commandment*" (Matthew 22:36–38). Nothing is of greater importance than loving God! If we fail to take this seriously, we may find at the end of our lives that all our works counted for nothing. Ashes on the altar!"

So, our first 2 main points in our series, "Lessons in True Love" are as follows:

I. True Love is not Words—it's a Commitment

II. True Love is not Feelings—it's Service

Come on back next week as we continue this series.

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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