

211. The Gospel of John 21:17-18

Lessons in True Love-Part 5
A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
(2-26-23)

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So, we have come to the final chapter of John's Gospel—a chapter that John uses to focus on the restoration of Peter.

But as we have said numerous times—Jesus is restoring Peter by teaching him lessons in true love (the love of God).

These lessons should first and foremost be applied to our relationship with Jesus—but also to our relationship with our spouse in marriage as well.

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

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

III. True Love is not Selfish—it's Sacrificial—v.18-19

John 21:18-19 (NKJV)

¹⁸ "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God...

Again, Jesus is restoring Peter, but in the process, He is teaching Peter (and the rest of us) what true love is all about—and here in these verses He is telling Peter that true love is not *selfish* (Peter's denial of Jesus due to his own fear of being crucified)—it's sacrificial.

And just how does the Lord Jesus Christ communicate this truth to Peter? —By telling Peter that there was a cross in *his* future. Of course, Jesus always taught by example—He never left divine truth in the realm of the theoretical—He always lived it out in the practical.

This was a teaching that Jesus really introduced and emphasized in His final discourse to His disciples the night before *His* crucifixion—a truth He had lived out in His own life:

John 15:9-14, 17 (NKJV)

⁹ "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full. ¹² This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are My friends if you do whatever I command you...¹⁷ These things I command you, that you love one another.

So, as we study Jesus' farewell address to His closest men, the subject that most dominated our Savior's thinking the night before the cross was that His disciples would love each other with God's divine agape love—which means *sacrificially*.

Let me just start by saying this—if God's agape love is going to flow from us to those around us on a daily basis—it first of all requires a change of *mind*.

In other words, you have to really *want* to walk in agape love—God won't force it upon you.

And since our natural *human* love dominates our hearts and minds—we need God's grace to have a change of mind in this regard.

We must start looking for opportunities to exercise agape love and *embrace* them—in other words, we need to look for opportunities to deny ourselves what we want to give to others what they want or need—starting with our families. (Philippians 2:3)

Let me say this—our natural human love is often counterproductive to the life God wants us to live—in fact, I'll go as far as to say that our human love is often *toxic*.

By that I mean—human love is rooted in self (our fallen nature) and if self-love is allowed to dominate our lives it will slowly destroy us and every relationship in our lives—starting with our marriages.

The reason is because our natural human love is inherently selfish and self-centered (not always but most of the time)—it usually loves those who love us or who can benefit us in some way.

And so, even though human love can seem virtuous outwardly—there are often hidden agendas behind it and selfish motives attached to it—which means, at its core it is often toxic and destructive.

I personally have known people whose spouse adored them when they first got married but over the course of time as they kept putting themselves first, pursuing their own selfish desires and agendas and even committing adultery on them.

That over time—their selfishness slowly destroyed their relationship with their spouse and turned a once beautiful *love* relationship into a *hate* relationship all because of self-love.

And then we see people who are so consumed by self-love that they don't want to get married or have children because marriage and parenthood would not allow them to love themselves as they truly desire and deserve—(mention comedian Chelsea Handler's latest video).

God's love on the other hand is the exact opposite—when practiced through His strength and grace—our lives *inwardly* become healthy, strong, and fruitful.

And our *outward* relationships with others also become healthy and strong and beautiful—starting with our marriages. The reason being is because we are now focusing on others by putting them first and our desires last—even as Jesus illustrated thru His Own life:

Philippians 2:3-8 (NKJV)

³ Let nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Let

this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.

As we die to self, putting others needs above ourselves, making them the focus and seeking to serve them with all our heart—our marriages especially will blossom and in the process the joy of the Lord will fill our hearts as well. (John 13:17; 15:11)

Now, earlier in the evening while still in the upper room the night before His crucifixion, in emphasizing the importance of His disciples loving one another after He returned to His Father in heaven—the Lord Jesus officially gave them (and all His disciples) a new commandment for the New Covenant in John Chapter 13:34-35—

John 13:34-35 (NKJV)

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love [agape] one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

This was the commandment that the Lord Jesus referred back to in Chapter 15:12-13:

John 15:12-13 (NKJV)

¹² This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

The dictionary defines love (human love) like this:

"A profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person; a feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection—as for a parent, child, or friend; sexual passion or desire."

Notice how the dictionary defines *human love* in terms of feelings—but God's love isn't just words and feelings.

Agape love is *action* based—"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." (John 3:16)

God's love is unconditional, universal and non-discriminating—as the Scriptures say, "God so loves the world" and "*is no respecter of persons.*"

Human love is limited and can diminish over time, which we are seeing in our own culture today—especially in marriage.

The love of many husbands for their wives and wives for their husbands has grown cold toward each other—toward the person they vowed they would love for better or for worse, in sickness and in health—for the rest of their lives.

For many couples it isn't until "*death do us part*"—it's until "*divorce do us part.*"

And again, such is the nature of human love rooted in the fallen, selfish heart of man—it often has an '*expiration date*' attached to it.

But God's love (agape) never diminishes, and it never expires because God is the source of this love and God never diminishes or changes—"He is the same yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

Jesus said that human love (the love of the world), *“loves its own”* (John 15:19)—its own family, its own friends, and those in its own sphere of influence who can benefit them in some way—but God’s love, loves all—even His enemies:

Matthew 5:44-45 (NLT2)

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies...⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

When people hear Jesus say we are to *“love our enemies”*—they immediately respond, *“How can I love (have feelings for) my enemies!”*

Well, you probably can’t—but again, God’s love isn’t about feelings.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, Paul the apostle gives us the best definition/description of God’s love in all the New Testament—using all verbs, because God’s love is not feelings, it’s actions!

That’s how we can love people we have never met and have no feelings for personally—by helping them in tangible ways and meeting their needs (picking up medicine, buying them groceries or by donating to those who have experienced a natural disaster etc.)

Of course, God’s agape love needs to be demonstrated first and foremost among Christians in the family of God.

John, in his first epistle, tells us that true Christians love other Christians—but not just verbally—they love them tangibly.

1 John 3:16-18 (NKJV)

¹⁶ By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

Look, loving people as God commands with His agape love is impossible for us—it goes beyond our natural ability.

Again, this is not a love I can manufacture or produce out of my own fallen human heart.

It is not in me to love like this because agape love is a divine, supernatural love that only flows from God Who is its Source. (*“God is love”*—1 John 4:8)

God’s attributes are intrinsic to His nature—and to His nature alone.

That means that unbelievers (what the Bible calls the “natural man”) cannot duplicate the attributes of God from a fallen heart—which means he can ‘fake’ but cannot ‘make’ the fruits of the Holy Spirit (‘love, joy, peace...’ etc.).

The only way for a person to experience the attributes of God in their life (which are exclusive to His nature)—is to have the God’s nature *planted* within them thru the new birth. (Explain)

2 Peter 1:4 (NKJV)

⁴ by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature...

Romans 5:5 (NLT)

⁵ ...For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.

God's love is an all-encompassing and unconditional love that loves freely regardless of how that love is treated in return (John 3:16)!

Which is different from human love which is reciprocal ("*I love you because you love me.*") and conditional ("*but I only love you when you treat me right or give me what I want...*").

To say it again, God's love is not like human love, it is supernatural love that is not inherent to our human nature—in other words, it is not of this earth—it is a fruit of His nature!

And this was a lesson that Jesus was ultimately teaching Peter—the disciple who couldn't tell Jesus he loved ('agaped') Him—

John 21:15 (NKJV)

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

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—which is deep, fervent, unconditional, and sacrificial.

So, Jesus is asking Peter, "**Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me with the love of God**"—to which Peter responded—"Yes, Lord; You know that I *love* You." (verse 15)

However, Peter responds with the Greek word 'phileo' which is a word that is used for *friendship* love—a word that means a '*fondness*' or '*affection*' kind of love—or in other words, 'human love.'

So when Jesus asked Peter—"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me with the love of God?"—he responded, "Yes, Lord; You know that I am *fond* of You"—i.e., "I love You with human love."

The question is—why didn't Peter respond with the *higher* word for love (agape)—I believe he wanted to?

But how could he after denying even knowing the Lord 3 times—and this after he had promised the Lord that he would die before he would ever deny Him!

John 21:16–17 (NKJV)

¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son of Jonah*, do you love [agape] Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." 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.

(Check the message out from 2 weeks ago to hear the full teaching on this passage)

But then Peter said this to Jesus—**“Lord, You know all things; You know that I’m fond of You.”**

In other words, *“Lord, I want to be able to say that I love You with the love of God (fervently, passionately and sacrificially) but right now the best I can do is love You with my human love—which is frail, faulty and prone to failure.”*

At this point Jesus responds to Peter—

John 21:18–19 (NKJV)

¹⁸ Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.

You see what Jesus was telling Peter was, *“I know that you want to tell Me and show Me that you do love Me with the love of God—but right now you can’t. However, Peter, the day is coming when you will be able to both tell Me and show Me that you love Me with divine agape love!”*

And when was that day?—when Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and went to the cross and died for Jesus. You see, it was not until Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit that he would be able to live (and die) for His Lord—and the same is true with all of us who are children of God.

Check out the transformation of Peter before and after he was baptized in the Holy Spirit—

Acts 4:5–12 (NKJV)

⁵ And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, ⁶ as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: ⁹ If we this day are judged for a good deed *done* to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, ¹⁰ let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. ¹¹ This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ ¹² Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

This was the same Peter that just 3 months earlier had stood out in the courtyard of the high priest's house while Jesus was inside being interrogated by the Sanhedrin—cowering and denying knowing Jesus 3 times. (Explain)

But Jesus knew the day was going to come when Peter could say, *“Yes Lord I agapao You—I love you deeply, fervently, unconditionally, and sacrificially!”*—but not until he was filled with the Holy Spirit and went to the cross.

Until we take up the cross and die to self for Jesus' sake, we cannot say we 'agapao' Him—all we can truly say to Him is *“I’m fond of You.”*

All we can do is love Him with our human love—and this goes for our marriages as well.

Ephesians 5:25 (NKJV)

²⁵ Husbands, love [agape] your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,

Some would say, “*You can’t command a feeling*”—that’s true, but God isn’t commanding feelings—He’s commanding actions.

As we’ve already said—God’s love isn’t a feeling it’s a commitment that saw our need and caused Him to act—and act sacrificially. (John 3:16)

Husbands, when you commit to loving your wife sacrificially regardless of feelings—feelings will many times follow.

Remember Jesus didn’t die for His Bride because He *felt* like it—He died for us because we had a need—without dying in our place we could not be saved.

He put our need above His own feelings and sacrificed Himself for us. (Hebrews 12:2)

Men, you will never begin to love your wife sacrificially until you die to self and love Jesus sacrificially first.

Then loving your wife, the way Christ loved the Church will be a ‘fruit’ of your love for Jesus!

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that God’s love, “*seeks not its own*” and as long as you’re looking at marriage for what you can get out of it—you’ll never begin to understand what it means to love your wife as Christ loved the Church.

And ladies the same goes for you.

Next week we’ll finish this series “Lessons in True Love.”

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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