



DO YOU LOVE ME?

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 21:1-25

42nd Message

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Today we conclude our studies in the Gospel of John, a series which we began in November of 1991. I feel as though we are bidding farewell to a good friend, but I hope you will return to this wonderful gospel again and again and keep your memories of it fresh.

Chapter 21 is actually the epilogue to this gospel (the conclusion comes in 20:30-31.) In this epilogue, John has something more to say about Peter. If John described himself as the "apostle whom Jesus loved," Peter is the apostle who loved Jesus. That is the point of the epilogue, as we will see.

Of late I have been learning to love God with my mind and my emotions. This is a new experience for me. I grew up a survivor, and the Lord has blessed with me with a sharp mind. I have the ability to take in information quickly. But the down side of this is that I am protective: I have difficulty trusting people. At times my relationship with the Lord is rather academic and isolated from my emotions. Learning to be transparent and honest is new to me. This epilogue to John's gospel speaks to this issue and helps us with loving the Lord on an emotional level as well as with our mind.

The chapter begins with the decision by the disciples, following the crucifixion of Jesus, to return to their livelihood of fishing.

21:1 After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested {Himself} in this way. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the {sons} of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out, and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

An understanding of Peter's frame of mind will be helpful. Protestants may shrink from any suggestion of Peter's leadership role among the apostles, but it is safe to say that he was in fact their leader and spokesman. Together with John and James, Peter was part of Jesus' inner circle, and thus was privileged to see and hear things that were not revealed to others. Peter had keen insight. He was the first disciple to affirm that Jesus was the Messiah. But he denied the Lord too, although he swore he would never do that. Peter was crushed by that failure. He wept bitterly over it, and it took him a long time to recover from it.

When Peter saw the grave clothes in the tomb of Jesus, he realized that the Lord had indeed risen from the dead. Shortly afterwards Jesus had a conversation with him, the contents of which we are not told. (Both Luke and the apostle Paul make mention of this conversation with Peter.) But at this point Peter still felt unfit for ministry, due to his failure. He had given way to cowardice, his reputation was

shot, and he was of no further use to the Lord, he felt, even though he knew that his relationship with Jesus could be restored through forgiveness. This was one reason he told his friends he was returning to his livelihood as a commercial fisherman. He felt he did not have anything left to say, so he might as well go back to fishing. So Peter and his six friends push their big troller out on the lake. They fished all night, but caught nothing, a rarity for a commercial fisherman; some nights the catch might be sparse, but catching nothing was an oddity.

As the fishing party is about to return to shore, they are hailed by a figure on the beach.

21:4 But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Looking through the mist, they see a figure on the shore, about one hundred yards distant.

21:5 Jesus therefore said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No."

The way the question is phrased anticipates a negative answer. In fact, the NASB gives the literal rendering in the margin. Jesus didn't even use the word "fish." He merely referred to something that is placed between two pieces of bread. The fishermen didn't even have enough for a sandwich, much less to make a profit and provide for their families. Jesus knew they had caught nothing.

21:6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find {a catch}." [I don't know about you, but I don't like people telling me how to do something I already know how to do well.] They cast therefore, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. That disciple therefore whom Jesus loved [John] said to Peter, "It is the Lord." [John realized that only the Lord could do that.] And so when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped {for work}), and threw himself into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net {full} of fish. And so when they got out upon the land, they saw a charcoal fire {already} laid, and fish placed on it, and bread.

This setting would be a vivid reminder to Peter of his failure. It was around a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the home of the high priest that he had denied the Lord. The fact that a fish was already laid on the charcoal indicates that the Lord didn't have to take from their catch. He didn't need their provision; he was well able to provide for their needs.

21:10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." Simon Peter went up, and drew

the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

This scene rang another bell in Peter's mind. He was reminded of another incident from a couple of years earlier. According to Luke's account, Peter and his brother, Andrew, together with James and John, their partners in a fishing business, were out on this lake, possibly in the same spot, cleaning their nets after a night's unsuccessful fishing. The Lord came by with a number of people whom he was teaching, and the crowd grew so large that Jesus had to stand in the water. He asked Peter if he could stand in his boat, and Peter complied. Peter had heard him teach a number of times and had known him pretty well by this time.

When he had finished teaching, Jesus said to Peter, in effect, "Let's go fishing again. I know a good spot." Reading between the lines in Luke 5, Peter probably was thinking, "Lord, you stick to preaching. I'll do the fishing. I won't preach if you won't fish." Nevertheless, out of deference to the Lord, Peter agreed, and he went out and let down the net. The catch was so vast that the nets began to break! He had to call for his partners to help. The chastened Peter fell on his face and said to Jesus, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." But Jesus said to him, "Peter, you have been catching fish. Follow me, and from now on I will make you into a fisher of men." From that point on Peter left his boats, and his vocation of fishing, and began to follow the Lord.

Here on the beach, around another charcoal fire, our Lord is reenacting that scene to remind Peter of his promise that he would make him a fisher of men, and assuring him that his failure had not disqualified him from ministry. Sinners cannot outfail the grace of God! No failure is too great for that. All sin that is repented of is forgotten by God, and the sinner is returned again to the task. The things that you did in the past do not disqualify you. Have you ever wondered how you could teach that Sunday School class you when acted the way you did? How can I preach this morning after that conversation I had yesterday with my son? It is because we are forgiven. Many people are paralyzed by things they did years ago, but we need to know that sin repented of does not disqualify us from service. That is the lesson Peter is being taught.

God lets us fail not to shame us, but to assure us that though we are guilty, vile and helpless, he still loves us. His love for us in the face of our wickedness awakens us to humility and contrition. He is not, like the advertisement for the Marine Corps, looking for a few good men. There are none. He uses our sin to awaken our need for his grace. Sin softens us and makes us more amenable to his shaping. When we fall, we fall into his hands. And so, rather than mourn our humiliation, we need to accept God's grace and his offer of forgiveness, and move on. That is what Jesus is helping Peter do. Sin results in consequences that we will have to deal with for the rest of our lives, but once it is acknowledged and confessed, even sin works for good. In fact, God uses our weaknesses to shape us into his image. Here is how John Newton put it:

I asked the Lord that I may grow
in faith and love and every grace.
Might more of his salvation know,
and seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
and He I trust has answered prayer,
But it has been in such a way
as almost drove me to despair.

I thought that in some favored hour,
at once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's transforming power,
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of that He made me feel
the hidden evils of my heart,
And bade the angry powers of hell
assault my soul in every part.

Nay, more, with His hand He seemed
intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord, why this?" I trembling cried.
"Wilt Thou pursue this worm to death?"
"This is the way," the Lord replied,
"I answer prayer for grace and faith."

"These inward trials I employ
from sin and self to set thee free,
And cross thy schemes of earthly joy
that thou might find thy all in Me."

This was what Jesus was doing with Peter.

Next, in a dramatic exchange, Jesus continues his restoration of Peter to ministry. Peter had bragged to the Lord in the presence of the other disciples that he would be more faithful than they, but then he had denied him three times. Now, on the shores of Lake Galilee, around another charcoal fire, Peter is restored.

21:12 Jesus said to them, "Come {and} have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread, and gave them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead. So 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, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again 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, "Shepherd My sheep." 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 all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep.

Much has been made of the fact that Jesus uses two different words for "love," and that Peter uses yet a different word for "love" than our Lord does. Some say that the first word our Lord uses, *agapao*, is the word for divine love, i.e., the way God loves. According to this theory, Jesus is saying to Peter, "Do you love me like that, like God, in a self-sacrificing way?" But Peter uses a different word in his answer. He says, "Yes, Lord, I *phileo* you." ("Philadelphia," "The

City of Brotherly Love," comes from this word.) Some say this is referring to human love, a lesser kind of love. So this passage is interpreted as follows: Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you love me with God's kind of love?" Peter responds, "No, Lord, the best I can do is human love." Jesus asks a second time, "Peter, do you love me with God's kind of love?" Peter replies, "No, the best I can do is human love." Finally, the Lord condescends and asks Peter, "Do you even love me with human love?" Peter says, "Oh yes, Lord, you know I love you."

But I don't think that is what is going on here. In the first place, these two words do not distinguish between divine love and human love. The argument simply does not hold true if we look at how these words are used throughout the gospel of John. The first word that our Lord uses, *agapao*, means "to love someone volitionally and sacrificially, to choose to seek another's highest good, regardless of feelings." The second word, *phileo*, refers to how one feels; it has to do with emotion and passion. Both of those words are used of God and man.

I don't think the Lord was coming down to Peter's level; I think Peter was coming up to his level. Jesus is asking Peter if he loved him volitionally, if he chose to love him, and Peter replies, in effect, "Oh Lord, I love you with all my heart and soul and mind and strength!" Jesus asks him a second time, "Peter, do you love me volitionally?" Peter responds, "Lord, you know I love you. You know how affectionate I feel towards you." Jesus asks again, "Peter, do you love me with that kind of passion?" John says that Peter was grieved at this point. He wasn't annoyed that Jesus asked him if he loved even with a *phileo* kind of love. Peter realized at last what Jesus was doing: Jesus had asked him a third time because he had denied him three times. This was the Lord's way of letting him know that he was restored. At this, Peter broke down. He knew that Jesus had planned this whole scene. Three denials, three confessions, and three commissions, all taking place around a charcoal fire. Peter knew there were no barriers between him and his Lord.

My youngest son, Timothy, and I play a little game at night when he is in bed. I tell him that I love him, and he tells me that he loves me. Then we ask each other to show how much we love each other by holding our hands apart and asking, "Do you love me *this* much?" I think this is what Jesus is doing here. He asks Peter, "Do you love me, Peter?" and Peter says, "Yes, I do!" Then Jesus asks, "How much?" Peter says, spreading his hands apart, says, "This much! I *phileo* you. I *agapao* you. I love you with all of my heart, and all my soul, and all my strength. I love you with everything I have." And Jesus says, "All right, Peter. Feed my sheep."

Ministry flows naturally out of love for the Lord. We don't need to lay guilt trips on people to get them involved in Sunday School or home fellowships. Such motivation is short lived. Impetus for ministry comes from a love for God. That is the only thing that will sustain it.

And how does God love us? I have always liked how Brennan Manning describes God's unconditional affection for us:

When I am in conscious communion with the reality of the wild, passionate, relentless, stubborn, pursuing, tender love of God for me, then it's not that I have to or I got to or I must or I should or I ought; suddenly, I want to change because I know how deeply I'm loved. One of the

wonderful results of my consciousness of God's staggering love for me as I am is a freedom not to be who I should be or who others want me to be. I can be who I really am. And who I am is a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions: I believe and I doubt, I trust and I get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty if I don't feel guilty. Aristotle said we are rational animals. I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. It is the real me that God loves. I don't have to be anybody else. For 20 years I tried to be Brother Teresa. I tried to be Francis of Assisi. I had to be a carbon copy of a great saint rather than the original God intended me to be. The biggest mistake I can make is to say to God, "Lord, if I change, you'll love me, won't you?" The Lord's reply is always, "Wait a minute, you've got it all wrong. You don't have to change so I'll love you; I love you so you'll change." I simply expose myself to the love that is everything and have an immense, unshakable, reckless, raging confidence that God loves me so much he'll change me into the child that he always wanted me to be.

Notice that Jesus says, "Feed *my* (not *your*) sheep." Ministry is described in verbs, "tend" and "feed," not nouns. Jesus is not saying, "Become a pastor or a missionary." The first question (it is not the only one, but it is the first one) to ask ourselves is not, "Do I love my ministry?" or "Do I love my Sunday School class?" or "Do I love my Home Fellowship?" The first question for us is, "Do I love Jesus?" If we love Jesus we will want to feed his sheep. That activity will flow naturally out of our relationship to him. When you get in touch with your own love for the Lord, you will want to love others with the spiritual gifts he has given you.

And we must be honest. We must not fake this love. If something is holding you back from loving the Lord, if all you have is an academic love for him, then you are missing out. If there is no passion, then there is no love. In all probability there is pain inside of you that is preventing you from feeling passionate toward God. I have discovered that the closer I come to God, the more prominent the pain becomes. You don't want the pain to get worse, so you flee your emotions.

This is an area where God is working in my life. It's easy for me to love the Lord in an academic way, because I know a lot about him. The tough part is dealing with the feelings, the emotions. I am learning that the only way I can truly love Jesus is to understand who is this God whom I am called to trust and love, and to remind myself of what he has done for me — not for *you*, but for *me!* That is when affection begins to well up inside of me — when I understand that he died for me. If I had been the only person in the world, he would have died for me. He has freed me from the guilt of my past, and he is preparing for me a future of eternal fellowship with him. No matter how hard life becomes, he has provided everything I need.

The writings of the Jesuit priest, Henri Nouwen, have been a great help to me in these areas. In one of his books he writes of a conversation he had with Mother Teresa at a time when he was struggling with his desire to serve the Lord. Her advice to him was simple, as her advice always seems to be. She said, "Henry, spend one hour a day in adoration of Jesus, and everything will be all right." He wrote, "That is the best advice I ever had." Most of us probably can't spend one hour a day in adoration of Jesus, but the principle is the same: Spend some time in adoration of the

Lord, and you will be all right. Set up a regular time to look though the Word and into the face of Jesus. It will increase your love for him.

Jesus goes on to tell Peter that because he is forgiven and restored, and because he has affirmed his love for him, does not mean that his life is going to be problem-free.

21:18 "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to {go.}" Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following {them;} the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what {is that} to you? You follow Me!" This saying therefore went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but {only,} "If I want him to remain until I come, what {is that} to you?" This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.

Pointing to his friend John, Peter asks, "What about him?" Jesus replies, "What happens to him doesn't matter. You follow me." John probably died of old age. He was exiled and mistreated but, unlike Peter, he wasn't martyred. Here Jesus is telling Peter that just because he loves the Lord does not mean that his life on earth would be easy. Coming to Christ does not mean we will not struggle in our marriages or with our health. But that's all right. Our task is simply to follow him, to love him with all of our mind and heart and soul and strength.

In the 1992 Summer Olympics, Derek Redmond was running in the semi-finals of the 400 meters. Running the race of his life, he rounded the final bend in the lead. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in the back of his leg. He fell down in agony, grabbing his torn hamstring muscle. I will read from the "Sports Illustrated" account of what happened next:

As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. "It was animal instinct," he would say later. He set out hopping, in a crazed attempt to finish the race. When he reached the stretch, a large man in a T-shirt came out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father. "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son. "Yes, I do," said Derek. "Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish together." And they did. Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way to the end, and the crowd gaped, then rose and howled and wept. Derek didn't walk away with the gold medal, but he walked away with an incredible memory of a father who, when he saw his son in pain, left his seat in the stands to help him finish the race.

This is what our Father does for us. Too many scars, too many failures, too many sins may have prompted us to give up on our dreams, but God wants us to know that he is with us every step of the way.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come.
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

God wants us to bury our faces in his shoulder and finish the race together. Love God, whether things go well or not, with everything that is in you. That is the first commandment.

So we come to the end of this book, written by the "disciple whom Jesus loved." John's purpose for writing it, as we saw in verse 31 of chapter 20, was "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." Let us thank Him today and every day for that life which we have in His name. Amen.

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