

February 14, 2016
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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FEED MY SHEEP
John 21:15-19

This passage of Scripture is one of the better known sections of the Bible. Most of us have heard numerous sermons that attempt to explain the difference between “love” and “love” as Jesus used two different words for love in this brief conversation. In many ways this text is special to a lot of Christ’s followers. I cannot say that this text is more special to me than it is to anyone else. Such a claim would be foolish. However, I can say that this story is very dear to me. It is not that this text uncovers deep spiritual truths and mysteries that stimulate my intellect. It is not that the story drives home an unforgettable truth that all Christians should grasp.

This portion of the Bible is so special to me because this is the Scripture that God used in my life to call me to follow Him in full-time service as His under-shepherd. If I may, I would like to tell you the story of how God used this conversation between Jesus and Peter to draw me into obedience to Him.

I graduated from high school in 1971. Everyone assumes that when a young man graduates from high school he has plans to pursue an education or a particular field for his life’s vocation. When people asked me what I planned to do with my life, my stock reply was, “Anything but be a pastor.” I just wasn’t interested in getting locked into that kind of work. I grew up in a pastor’s home. My grandfather was a pastor. I had two uncles who were pastors. I had an uncle who was a missionary. I just wanted to do something different.

I went off to college, from which I promptly flunked out. I goofed off for a few more months. Then about the time I met Pat, the Lord began to work in my life. We were married in September 1973 at the ripe, old age of nineteen. We became part of a church in the

town where we lived and promptly got involved in choir, AWANAS, teaching Sunday School, and visitation.

In June 1974 on a Tuesday night, we attended a missions conference at the church. I cannot remember who the missionary was, but I will never forget the sermon he preached. It was not that he was a particularly good preacher or that the sermon was a barn burner. Rather, he simply communicated this story from John’s Gospel, and as he did God spoke directly to me. I remember sitting in that pew thinking, “God is asking me to feed His sheep. Why is God asking me to feed His sheep when He knows I don’t want to do that?” It was almost like there was no one else in the auditorium. Just God and me. And He was asking me to do the impossible.

The next morning as I drove to work, I had quite an argument with God. I was building houses in Erie, PA at the time, and it was a forty-five minute drive to work. For forty-five minutes I argued with God. I’m sure I made Moses’ argument with God look like child’s play. Finally, I broke. I think I could take you to the spot along the highway where I broke down sobbing, finally submitting to God’s will for my life.

Now what was I going to tell my wife of nine months? That evening, I tried to explain to Pat how I was absolutely sure that God called me to be a pastor. She responded, “That’s fine.” Assuming she didn’t get the importance of what I said, I explained that I would need to prepare for the ministry which would require us selling what little we had and moving somewhere so that I could attend college for at least four years. She responded, “That’s fine. When I married you, I knew that you were going to be a pastor.” Silence . . . Why did everyone in life except me seem to know that I was going to be a pastor?

I have never forgotten the circumstances of the Good Shepherd calling me to be an under-shepherd to feed His sheep. I think sometimes that this story from John impacted me as much as it impacted Peter. He too never got over the mercy, grace, and kindness of Jesus that welcomed Peter into restored fellowship so that he could feed the Good Shepherd’s sheep.

Do You Love Jesus Enough to Serve Him (vv.15-17)?

At the outset, I would like to spend a few minutes considering Jesus' use of synonyms in this text. Certainly that sounds too technical for a sermon. True. But because many Christians come to this text presupposing that the different words for love is the essential lesson of the text, we need to consider how important those two synonyms are as well as consider four other synonyms Jesus used in the same verses.

We probably can say with some assurance that the pressing question from Jesus is, "Do you love?" The first word in the text translated "love" is the familiar word *agapao*. As we have concluded many times in the past, this kind of love is a conscious decision to do what is best for the recipient of love even if it requires sacrifice. Generally, this is what this word came to mean through the use of it throughout the New Testament. By the time John wrote this Gospel account in the year 85, the idea that *agapei* love was special was pretty well entrenched.

However, it is also clear in the New Testament that Jesus used the same word to speak of pretty ordinary affection for pretty ordinary folks. He said, "*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*" (Matthew 5:46). Likewise Paul used this word to say that Demas was *in love* with this present world (2 Timothy 4:10). That sounded more like lust or passion than sacrificial love.

The second word for love in our text, the one Peter used, is *phileo*. This is like love for a sibling or close friend, a strong affection. It was the more common word for love in a relationship used in the period 100 B.C. – A.D. 50. It is important for us to consider that while John 3:35 states that God the Father has *agapao* for God the Son (which we would expect), John 5:20 states that He has *phileo* for the Son. Yet, as expected, we are supposed to *love* Jesus more than we *love* (*phileo*) parents or kids (Matthew 10:37).

Therefore, it seems fitting that we should not conclude that *agapao* always has to refer to the supreme, God-like love, while *phileo* is always a weak, human kind of love. And yet at the same time, we cannot ignore the reality that *agapao* love does demand greater sacrifice.

We also discover that Jesus used two synonyms for the idea of feeding. Jesus told Peter to feed (*bosko*) His lambs. This is the work of a herdsman in feeding, tending to sheep or other animals. Most of the time in the New Testament, this word is used in connection with feeding pigs. It is also true that the person responsible for feeding would run away when there is trouble.

The second word Jesus used is more intense. Jesus also told Peter to shepherd (*poimaino*) His sheep. This word is never used negatively in the New Testament. The word speaks of the one who loves the sheep, protects the sheep, and gives his life for the sheep. It encompasses all of the work of the shepherd. This is the word God chose to picture pastors in the New Testament (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 9:7; 1 Peter 5:2). Because it is connected with care and tenderness, we are not surprised to discover that it is the work of Jesus in the Revelation. John saw, "*For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*" (Revelation 7:17).

There is one more pair of synonyms in this text. Jesus talked about lambs and sheep. In verse fifteen, we find the word lambs (*arnion*). This is the general word for sheep, lambs, or rams. In the New Testament, it is found only here and then twenty-nine times in Revelation where it refers to Jesus as the Redeemer and Ruler. In our text, Jesus used the word to speak of the community of Christ's people, the objects of His love.

In verse sixteen, there is a synonym for lamb, that word translated sheep (*probaton*). This word specifically referred to the domestic flock as opposed to wild sheep in the wilderness. Figuratively, it refers to Jesus' special flock. His sheep are His own people He bought with His blood. Now we can put all of this together to discover what Jesus desires, but also what is often true about us.

Jesus taught, "If you love Me, you will keep My commands." It happened after breakfast when Jesus questioned Peter. John set the time marker by writing, *When they had finished breakfast (v.15a)*. Clearly the seven disciples are still there in the picture. Did Jesus bring up this very important matter in the presence of the others? Maybe He did. Although a quick view of verse twenty indicates that maybe Jesus and Peter had moved some distance from the others.

A public restoration of Peter would have been quite fitting in light of the fact that Peter had boasted in the presence of the other disciples that he had all that was required within himself to stand for Jesus. You will remember that his boast came during supper when *Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37)*. Some minutes later while Jesus and the disciples were on the way to the Mt. of Olives, Jesus warned that in a short time all of the disciples would run away. *Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."* *Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."* *Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"* *And all the disciples said the same (Matthew 26:35)*. Peter made it very clear that he was sure he had what it takes to stick with Jesus through thick and thin.

The rest of the crucifixion story makes it very clear that Peter failed, just like Jesus warned he would do, even denying three times that he knew Jesus – much less loved Him! We know the good news that Peter was convicted in his soul, confessed, and repented.

Because Peter sorrowed for his sin and repented, Jesus restored Peter and challenged Him to greater service. His challenge was simple enough. "If you love me, feed my lambs." *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" (v.15b)*. That Jesus used the title *Simon son of John* means that whatever He was about to say was quite serious. This would be like your mother addressing you by your first, middle, and last names when you were a child. In that situation, you didn't have to ask, "Am I in trouble?"

The moment they met, Jesus had given Simon the name Peter. In his Gospel account, Mark often referred to Peter as Simon, but Jesus' words indicate that He used Simon when the issue at hand was important. This was indeed an important moment because Jesus questioned Peter's love. Did Peter love Jesus more than "these"? These might refer to the other disciples. Peter had contrasted himself with them by saying that even if they abandoned Jesus, he never would. Did Peter really love Jesus more than the other disciples did?

However, I like to think that Jesus' reference to "these" questioned whether Peter loved Jesus more than he loved the fishing business. It is possible that Jesus pointed to the 153 fish as He asked this question. Here was a reminder that Peter could live a comfortable life if he went back to fishing. Here also was a reminder that in the beginning of their relationship, Jesus had called Peter from fishing to catch men with the gospel. Now which would it be – Jesus or the fishing business? What about us? Is there anything or anyone we love more than we love Jesus?

The question for us is the same as the question for Peter. Did Peter make a conscience decision to give his best for Jesus even if it required sacrifice? At that moment, Peter knew that he could not claim a sacrificial love for Jesus after he had denied association with Him. Therefore, Peter very honestly acknowledged that He loved Jesus, but not sacrificially. Notice Jesus' response to Peter's honest confession. He didn't say, "Well Peter. If you can't love Me better than that, you might as well hit the road. Why don't you just go back to fishing because I can't use you."

No, even though Peter needed to grow in love, Jesus challenged him to "tend to My people." In a second challenge, Jesus told Peter that if he really loved Him, he must shepherd His sheep. *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."* Again the Greek text clearly reveals that Jesus asked Peter if he had sacrificial love for Him. Again Peter acknowledged that he loved Jesus, but not on that level.

What else could Peter say? Jesus knows everything. Okay, then why did He ask? Often the questions Jesus prompts us with from His Word are intended for us to tell the truth about ourselves. It is so easy for us to compare ourselves with the other guys and claim that we love Jesus more than they do. It is easy for us to mouth the words, "I love you Jesus," but the words don't come from a heart that truly loves Him. And to us who struggle to love supremely, Jesus graciously condescends to our weakness and asks us to Shepherd His flock.

Notice that they are **His** sheep. They are His sheep because He purchased them at the price of His blood. They are His sheep because He gathers together specific ones. He desires for all of them to

become like Him. Are you up to the task of feeding and caring for the Lord's sheep so that they will be spiritually healthy? Jesus still asks.

A third time Jesus pressed the question to Peter. "Are you sure you love Me?" John recorded, *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" (v.17).* A third time Jesus asked Peter if his love was a sacrificial kind of love. Peter was grieved probably most because he understood that Jesus asked the same question the same number of times he had denied Jesus.

It is human nature to revel in the fact that we can confess sin, God removes it from us as far as the east from the west, and we will never have to pay the penalty for it. However, we forget that often sin carries consequences that show up later. God uses the consequences to help us come to grips with how grievous the sin was to Him. Too often we grieve over the consequence of getting caught and never consider how horrible the sin was to God.

At this point in the conversation, Peter was realizing how deeply his sin hurt Jesus. Finally, the broken man confessed that he reached the end of his rope. He confessed that it was pointless for him to try to convince anyone that he was something more than he really was. He confessed that Jesus knows everything. Indeed, Jesus knows how shallow our love is. Let's quit pretending. We really don't love Jesus enough to sacrifice for Him.

But when we finally are willing to admit the truth about ourselves, admit how slightly we love Jesus, then Jesus can help our love grow. Peter was completely humiliated not because he wanted to be humble but because he had no argument, nothing to say. That is the point where Jesus needs to take us. We really cannot serve Him in our own strength. We truly must depend on Him every moment for wisdom, understanding, and strength to serve Him. Jesus really wants us to be engaged in shepherding His sheep. But we will fail at the task if we do not love Him correctly. He desires that we love our neighbor as ourselves. And we can't do that until we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Why? Because . . .

In Service Your Love Will Be Tested (vv.18-19).

Be sufficiently warned: the Lord's pathway does not lead through a rose garden. When you get all in with Jesus, life changes. Jesus told Peter, *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted (v.18a).* Those were the days my friend.

In 1968 Mary Hopkin had a hit single titled *Those Were the Days*. I think it was the only hit she ever had. The song was definitely not original with her. It was written in the early 1900's by two Russian men (actually one was from Georgia – the country). It was kind of a folk song that reminisced about youth and romantic idealism. The English lyrics in the course say:

Those were the days my friend
We thought they'd never end
We'd sing and dance forever and a day
We'd live the life we choose
We'd fight and never lose

For we were young and sure to have our way

Not surprisingly, by 1927 when the song became popular in Russia, Stalin promptly banned it! Do you remember days when you thought you were in charge, days when you did what you wanted to do?

Jesus said that when we really love Him, we grow up. He described Peter, and us, in very common terms. We put on the clothes we decide to put on. We walk wherever we choose for the most part. This is all part of human nature. But when we fall in love with Jesus, we want to do what He wants us to do. That is not to conclude that when our heart is fixed on Jesus that we must consult Him before we get dressed. Nor do we pray and ask the Lord's permission before we go someplace. And yet, it is very true that our relationship with the Lord does impact all of these and other simple matters of life. Love for Christ will result in a desire to order that life in a way that reflects love for Christ. Or as Jesus stated it, "We will keep His commands."

More than that, love for Christ can result in someone else deciding for us the simple things like dressing and going someplace. In fact, Jesus warns us that loving Him can be deadly. When Peter was young and foolish, he dressed himself and went where he wanted to go. Things were changing according to Jesus who said, *(18b) 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.)

This statement explains what Jesus was telling Peter about clothes and destinations. Up to this point Peter had been so confident, so sure, so convinced that he could take care of himself and of Jesus if necessary. Now Peter was learning what it means to belong to Jesus. This is not a reference to old age, the kind of thing caretakers do for us when we live in a nursing facility. This was Jesus’ promise that Peter would be martyred for loving Jesus. Jesus simply showed Peter that he would be killed by stretching out his hands, that is, he would be crucified. Tradition holds that Nero crucified Peter in Rome not long before Nero committed suicide.

And this was to the glory of God? Yes, that is what Jesus said. How? Consider that the world hates God because He is magnificently righteous and that is to His glory. That God chooses to deliver His precious people from this world through death is also to His glory. Sure it sounds strange to human ears, but the death of a believer is not a tragedy but a blessing. The people of the world will never understand David’s conclusion: *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints (Psalm 116:15)*.

Love Him, follow Him. *And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me” (v.19b)*. Jesus’ words, “Follow me” were not a suggestion. After Jesus restored Peter by reminding him how incapable he was in his own strength, and after Jesus restored Peter by challenging him to greater love, and after Jesus restored Peter by commissioning him to feed God’s sheep, and after Jesus predicted Peter’s death, Jesus gave Peter an enduring command.

Jesus told Peter to “come behind Me.” It is a present tense command. He meant that we who claim to love Him must characterize our lives as following Him. We must not run ahead of Him. We must not lag behind Him. Each day, all day, we must keep depending on Jesus in order to become more like Jesus.

And that is how, “If you love Me, keep My commands” works. It is very difficult to keep Jesus’ commands if we set them up as a group of rules that we will attempt to keep in our own strength. Everyone fails at that. But when we love Jesus, we follow Him. When we follow Jesus, we depend on Him. When we depend on Jesus, we

really don’t struggle with the idea of keeping His commands – even if it leads to persecution.

God graciously offers to us salvation from the penalty and power of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we embrace that offer by faith and confess our sins, we become followers of Jesus. Everyone who does that is to be engaged in feeding Jesus’ flock in some way. Are you following Jesus? Are you depending on Jesus? Are you keeping His command to feed His sheep?