

John 21:7-8, 15-17

“He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it”

Introduction

Last week, Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of Jesus’ disciples went out on the Sea of Galilee, fishing. After catching nothing all night, Jesus stood on the beach and called out to them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When the disciples had done this, they weren’t able to haul the net in because of the great number of fish. It was *in this way* that Jesus *manifested Himself* again to the disciples.

I. John 21:7-8 — Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” So when Simon Peter heard, “It is the Lord,” he put his outer garment on [or, “he tucked up his outer garment”] (for he was naked [stripped for work?]), and cast himself into the sea.

Peter may have previously removed his outer garment so that he was “naked” (*gymnos*; not stark naked, but clothed only in a tunic or something like a loin-cloth). In this case, he put his outer garment back on because he felt it more seemly to present Himself to the Lord fully clothed (even though this additional clothing would have been more cumbersome in the water). On the other hand, it’s possible that the outer garment was all Peter had on (he was “naked” [*gymnos*] underneath). In this case, he cinched up the garment with a rope-like belt (a cincture) and then tucked the lower folds of his garment into this belt so as to allow him more freedom of movement in the water. Whatever the case may be, after this hurried preparation (which John describes as one who was there) Peter cast himself into the sea in order to come the more quickly to Jesus.

Why does Peter do this, and none of the other disciples? First, there’s Peter’s “personality.” Some have called Peter “impetuous,” but this word has an unfair negative connotation. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that Peter was a man of “action.” It was Peter who said to Jesus when he saw Him walking on the sea, “Lord, if it is you, command me to *come* to you on the water” (Mat. 14:28). It was Peter who said to Jesus on the mount of transfiguration: “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will *make* three booths here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mat. 17:4). It was Peter who drew his sword when the officers from the chief priests and Pharisees came to arrest Jesus and *struck* the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear (Jn. 18:10).

Not only was Peter a man of action, he was also a forthright man who spoke what was on his mind and held nothing back. After the first miraculous catch of fish it was Peter who fell down at Jesus’ knees and said: “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Lk. 5:8). When Jesus asked the twelve if they also wanted to go away and stop following Him, it was Peter who answered: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:68-69). When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is,” it was Peter who answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mat. 16:16). On the other hand, when Jesus was telling the disciples of the suffering and death that awaited Him in Jerusalem, it was Peter who “took

[Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Mat. 16:22). When Jesus was washing the disciples’ feet, it was Peter who said to Him, “Lord, are You going to wash my feet?” And then, “You will never wash my feet—ever!” And then, “Lord, [wash] not only my feet, but also my hands and my head” (Jn. 13:6, 8-9). When Jesus said to the disciples, “Where I am going, you cannot come,” it was Peter who responded, “Lord, where are You going... why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You” (Jn. 13:33, 36-37). Peter was a man of action, not in the habit of holding anything back. And that hasn’t changed. When Peter heard, “it is the Lord,” he cast himself into the sea, the more quickly to come to Jesus.

But there’s another explanation for what Peter does. It’s Peter who—for all his confessions of faith, and for all his avowals of loyalty and devotion—has now denied Jesus three times; denying not only that he’s Jesus’ disciple, but even that he knows who Jesus is. So why isn’t Peter the one hanging back in shame? I believe this must have everything to do with the fact that Jesus has already come to him, separately, on the day that He was raised (Lk. 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). We’re never told what passed between Peter and Jesus (maybe Peter himself never told), but certainly Jesus must have extended to a shamed and broken Peter (cf. Mat. 26:75; Mk. 14:72; Lk. 24:62) His grace, and love, and forgiveness (Mk. 16:7). The Peter who we see casting himself into the sea is the Peter who loves much because he sees now how much he’s been forgiven (cf. Lk. 7:40-47). This isn’t to say that the other disciples’ love is inferior because they’ve not been forgiven as much or because they don’t see how much they’ve been forgiven. Their love isn’t inferior because they don’t cast themselves into the sea. The point is just Peter, and Peter’s story. In our own way—even if it doesn’t mean casting ourselves into the sea—we all ought to be those who love much because we see how much we’ve been forgiven. In fact, as Jesus says in another place, it’s our *love* that’s the sign to us that we *have* been forgiven (Lk. 7:47).

But when Jesus extends to Peter His grace, and love, and forgiveness, does this automatically mean that Peter is “reinstated” as one of “the twelve”? It’s one thing to be forgiven and restored in one’s relationship with Jesus; it’s quite another thing to be commissioned to the very “highest” position of stewardship and servant leadership in the kingdom of heaven.* How is the Peter who lapsed so severely—who publicly denied being Jesus’ disciple and who even publicly denied knowing who Jesus is—to be fully restored and even received by the future church not just as one of the Apostles, but as one of the “pillars” of the church (cf. Gal. 2:9)? Can you see what an astonishing and unexpected thing this must be? Of course, this isn’t what Peter is thinking when he casts himself into the sea. All he’s thinking of at that moment is his love for the one He denied

* Jesus did say to Peter before He died:

Matthew 16:17-19 — “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you [that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God], but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

And in another place, Jesus said to Peter:

Luke 22:31-32 — “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat. But I have prayed earnestly for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, once you have returned, strengthen your brothers.”

These verses, rather than make a formal “reinstatement” of Peter unnecessary, only show just how much more pressing and necessary such a “reinstatement” must be.

— a love that he probably feels unworthy, now, even to confess. More likely, all he feels he can confess now is shame and remorse.

Once again, we hear nothing of what passed when Peter came to shore. When the rest of the disciples arrived in the boat, they saw a charcoal fire in place and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus invited them to come and have breakfast. And now we pick up in verse fifteen:

II. John 21:15a — So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, [son] of John, do you love Me more than these?”

The last time we heard “Simon, son of John” was when Jesus first met Simon.

- John 1:40–42 — [Andrew]... found his... brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. When Jesus looked at him, He said, “**You are Simon the son of John**; you shall be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).[†]

Apart from the time that Jesus first met Simon and gave him the name, “Cephas (Peter),” the only other time we see this is when Jesus pronounces a blessing on Simon and again assigns him the name, Peter:

- Matthew 16:17–18 — “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah (*Bariona*; Jonah [Gr. *Ionas*] is an abbreviated form of John [Gr. *Ioannes*] in Aramaic), because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

In the two other places where Simon is identified as “Simon, son of John,” this full title is signaling the formality and the importance of what follows. Both times it’s connected with the new name Jesus gives to Simon, and so also with his future role in the church. It’s in this light, then, that we hear the risen Lord saying to Peter *after* his threefold denial of Jesus, “*Simon, [son] of John, do you love Me more than these?*”

Why does Jesus ask this question? Why does Jesus ask this question *now* when He’s already come to Peter once—privately? It appears that this question is not asked privately or off to the side, but in the presence of all the other disciples. Peter has denied Jesus publicly; now Jesus asks him “publicly”: “Do you love Me more than *these*?”—“Do you love Me more than these men love Me?”[‡] At one time Peter might have believed that this could be the case — not in the way of putting the others down, but because he was so convinced and so confident of the strength of His own devotion to Jesus. When Jesus said to the disciples, “You will *all* fall away because of Me this night,” Peter answered:

[†] That Jesus still calls him Simon here in chapter 21 (and not Cephas [or Peter]) has no special significance. Jesus isn’t addressing the “old” Peter, or the “old” Simon. Simon was one of Peter’s primary names up until the end of his life (Mat. 17:25; Mk. 14:37; Lk. 22:31; 24:34; Acts 10:5, 18, 32; 11:13; 2 Pet. 1:1).

[‡] In the context of John, I don’t see any reason to believe that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him more than he loves his boat and his nets (i.e. more than he loves his former life). If this was the case, there would be no reason for Peter to omit “more than these” in his answer. Neither is there any reason to believe that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him more than he loves the other disciples.

- Matthew 26:33 (cf. Mk. 14:29) — “Even though all may fall away because of You, **I** will never fall away.”

In John chapter 13 we hear Peter saying to Jesus:

- John 13:36–38 — “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can **I** not follow You right now? **I** will lay down **my** life for You.”

There’s a “sincere” self-confidence here that will have the natural tendency of elevating Peter—in his own eyes—above the rest of the disciples. They may fall away—they may not be willing to follow Jesus even to death—but Simon will not fall away; Simon will go with Jesus even to death.” It’s this self-confident spirit that Jesus challenged when He came to Peter, and James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane and found them sleeping, and when He said specifically to Peter:

- Mark 14:37 — “Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not keep watch for one hour?”

In the end, it was this self-confident spirit that was proved to be so empty when Peter denied Jesus not just one time, and not just two times, but three times.

“Simon, [son] of John, do you love Me more than these?” “Even if all *these* should fall away, would *you* follow Me even to death?” How is Peter to answer a question like this? How would you have answered?

III. John 21:15b — He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love[§] You.”

[§] Jesus asked Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love [*agapao*] Me.” Peter responded, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [*phileo*] You.” These two Greek verbs (*agapao* and *phileo*) do have a different semantic range of meaning. For example, *phileo* can mean “to kiss” (Mk. 14:44) whereas *agapao* never means “to kiss.” Some people emphasize the difference in the semantic range and conclude categorically that *phileo* denotes the love of friendship rooted in the affections while *agapao* denotes an unconditional love rooted in the will. Other people say that *phileo* is the lower, human love, while *agapao* is the higher, spiritual love. But there really isn’t any evidence for this (cf. Carson). The semantic range of these two words significantly overlaps so that they are most often used synonymously (the context determining any specific emphasis of either word). John is both the disciple “whom Jesus loved [*agapao*]” (Jn. 13:23) and the disciple “whom Jesus loved [*phileo*]” (Jn. 20:2). In John chapter 3, “the Father loves [*agapao*] the Son” (3:35) while in John chapter 5, “the Father loves [*phileo*] the Son” (5:20). Jesus says in John chapter 16: “[T]he Father Himself loves [*phileo*] you, because you have loved [*phileo*] Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father.” Obviously, *phileo* is not a lower or a less spiritual love than *agapao*. Likewise, it will be clear from the following verses that *agapao* is not a higher or more spiritual love than *phileo*. In John chapter 3 we’re told that “men loved [*agapao*] the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil” (3:19). In chapter 12 we’re told that the rulers in Israel “loved [*agapao*] the glory of men rather than the glory of God” (12:43; cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). In 2 Samuel 13, *agapao* is used for the “love” of Amnon for his half-sister whom he violated (2 Sam. 13:1, 4, 15).

If John intends for us to see a distinction in meaning between *agapao* and *phileo*, how should this distinction be understood? Is Peter humbly refusing to claim that he loves Jesus with an *agape* love by claiming “only” a *philos* love? If so, why does Peter answer Jesus in the affirmative, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [*phileo*] You”? If so, then we can only see another failure and defeat for Peter when Jesus finally, the third time around, asks Peter, “Do you love [*phileo*] Me?” The clear implication, then, would be that in the end Peter’s love for Jesus was subpar. On the other hand, does John intend for us to see that Peter is expressing to Jesus not “just” a love rooted in the will

Peter knows that he does love Jesus; but there's no longer any self-confidence here. His love for Jesus is anchored, now, in his awareness of his own sinful frailty and weakness, and so also of the mercy and love and forgiveness that he's received. He doesn't say, "Yes, Lord; I love You"; "Yes, Lord; I love You and will never fall away"; "Yes, Lord; I love You and will follow you even to the death"; "Yes, Lord; I love You and here are all the proofs." What are the "proofs," now, that Peter could give? The most recent "evidence" only testifies *against* Peter. Peter doesn't say, "Yes, Lord, I love You," *much less*, "Yes, Lord, I love You more than these." He says only, "Yes, Lord; *You know* that I love You." And so in this way, he confesses his love for Jesus while at the same time submitting that love wholly to Jesus for His recognition and His validation. "Yes, Lord, I do love You, but it doesn't matter in the end what I say that I know; it only matters what You know." "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." On the one hand, Peter is appealing to Jesus' divine knowledge (His omniscience); on the other hand, I wonder if he's also referring to what passed between them the first time that Jesus came to him. "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You because in the face of my complete and total failure, You have loved me."

This is a very different Peter than the Peter we've met before. Gone, now, is the self-confidence, and in its place is a humility and a spirit of dependence that will enable Peter to succeed in the future where he could only fail in the past. Peter said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

IV. John 21:15c — [Jesus] said to him, "Tend My lambs."

Here is something truly wonderful and astonishing—that Jesus now entrusts *to Peter* the stewardship and the care of *His own* lambs ("tend *My* lambs"). By all human standards this defies every reasonable expectation. Obviously, Jesus doesn't do this because of some innate worthiness or fitness that He's discovered in Peter. Why, then? At one level all we can answer is: Because of Jesus' own sovereign and gracious choice. At another level we can also answer: Because Peter has come to see just how *unworthy* and how *unfit* he is, and so—at the same time—he has come to possess the only true worthiness and the only true fitness for service in Christ's kingdom.

The key to our own usefulness in the kingdom is not our past track record—good or bad, but rather the real awareness in the present of how unworthy and unfit we are, and therefore also a sincere and humble *love* for the one who has loved us anyway, and who has forgiven us so much. All of us ought to be able to say, "I love You, Lord," but always underlying this profession of love should be the heart and the attitude that says every time, "Yes, Lord; *You know* that I love You." "It doesn't matter in the end what I say; it only matters what You know."

[*agapao*], but even a love rooted in the affections [*phileo*]? Again, there is no evidence for this kind of a categorical distinction in meaning between these two words.

The dialogue between Jesus and Peter was probably originally in Aramaic. If John was rendering the same Aramaic word for love, why does he choose two different Greek words? This simply reflects John's penchant for synonyms (e.g. 21:15c, 16c, 17d; "Lord, You know [*oida*] all things; You know [*ginosko*] that I love You"; 21:17c).

Jesus has formally reinstated and commissioned Peter. Peter has professed his love for Jesus, and Jesus has demonstrated His full acceptance of Peter's answer by entrusting to him the stewardship and the care of His own lambs. Why, then, do we go on to read in verse 16:

V. John 21:16a — He said to [Peter] again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

John could have written only, “He said to [Peter] *again*”; instead he writes, “He said to [Peter] again a *second* time.” John is counting; and that means that so also is Jesus. We remember what Peter said to Jesus on the night of His betrayal and what Jesus answered:

➤ John 13:37–38 — “Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You.” Jesus answered, “Will *you* lay down your life *for Me*? [No, I will lay down My life for you.] Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me *three times*.”

“[Jesus] said to [Peter] again a *second* time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

VI. John 21:16b — [Peter] said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

Peter doesn't resort the second time to an attempt to “convince” Jesus. He knows this isn't what Jesus is looking for. Indeed, if Jesus already knows that Peter loves Him, then why *does* He ask again? Why did He ask the first time? Surely Peter has already expressed his bitter remorse. The key here is to understand that this isn't so much a test or a call to careful self-examination as it is a gracious invitation. By asking this question, Jesus is *inviting* Peter a second time to publicly profess his love for and his devotion to Jesus — a public profession that in himself Peter must have felt wholly unqualified and unworthy to make. What Peter would never have felt the freedom to do on his own initiative, Jesus now graciously invites him to do.

“Simon, son of John, do you love Me.” And upon receiving this invitation a second time, Peter publicly confessed a second time, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

VII. John 21:16c — [Jesus] said to [Peter (a second time)], “Shepherd My sheep.”

Though this is an imperative, it's not primarily an “order” (“Whether you like it or not, shepherd My sheep”). Neither is Jesus rewarding Peter with something he's earned (“Since you love Me, you can shepherd My sheep”). Neither is this simply another test (“If you *really* love Me, then you'll shepherd My sheep”). Rather than being just an “order” or a “reward” or a “test,” what we have here is the honorable commissioning of Peter. After inviting Peter to profess publicly what he could never have dared to profess on his own initiative, Jesus then commissions him and bestows upon him the most sacred trust possible. “Shepherd My sheep.” And then we come to verse 17:

VIII. John 21:17a — He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

Previously John said “*a* second time”; now he says, with a note of finality, “*the* third time.” If John is counting, we know Jesus was, too. But why? Certainly not to rub Peter's failure in his

face. There's no guilting here. Certainly not because this is how Peter must "make up" for his three denials. There's no penance here, either.

Jesus asks Peter the third time so that Peter—and all the disciples who were listening—might be fully assured not only of His forgiveness, but also of God's own work of grace in Peter's heart. It's not Jesus who needs Peter's assurance, but Peter who needs the assurance of Jesus. It's not, therefore, Peter who initiates this three-fold public profession of love. It's Jesus who graciously affords him this opportunity — who invites him to do what he could never have presumed to do himself. "He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?'"

IX. John 21:17b — Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?"

Why is Peter grieved? Is it because Jesus hasn't forgiven him and is driving home his guilt? Is it because Jesus is reminding him of what a failure he's been? Certainly not. Peter understands that Jesus asks him this question the third time only because of His love for him and only for the sake of Peter's joy. But there can still be grief and pain in the very thing that we know full well is for our joy. How could that not be the case here? Peter was grieved because he understood. And so in the end, we can be sure that he was also glad that Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love Me." Here was an invitation to publicly profess his love to Jesus the same number of times as he had once publicly denied Him.

X. John 21:17c — And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."

And with this third profession of love, Jesus now bestows upon Peter the third time the "highest" honor and the most sacred trust possible in His kingdom.

XI. John 21:17d — Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."

Conclusion

See how tender are the mercies of our Lord. See how faithful He is to complete in us the work that He begins (cf. Phil. 1:6). May we, too, be emptied of all self-confidence, so that we may be fit and worthy for service in His kingdom. May we always be able to say with Peter—"Lord, You know all things; *You know* that I love You."