

**JOHN 21:15-17**

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

Peter could not have missed the parallel. Jesus asks three questions, just as Peter had denied Jesus three times. Peter denied Jesus just hours after promising that, though all others may abandon Jesus, Peter would remain steady. Peter denied Jesus even after Jesus warned him he would stumble... warned Peter to listen for the crow of the rooster.

What would *you* have said to Peter when you finally got him alone?

- A sarcastic, “*Hey, thanks for all the support, friend?*”
- A terse “*Told you so?*”
- A justified, “*I’m not sure I can trust you anymore?*”

Not Jesus. Instead, Jesus asks Peter three questions to parallel Peter’s three denials. At first glance they seem almost identical. Upon closer examination, they are quite different.

The first time Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him, the Greek text uses a form of the word *agapao*. Agape love is powerful, requiring total commitment to someone. It is the word most often used to describe how God loves us—completely committed to our well-being. Jesus also adds “more than these,” pointing to the other disciples. And so Jesus is asking Peter, “*Simon, are you really more committed to me than these other disciples?*”

Peter’s response is interesting. When he states that he loves Jesus, he uses a different word for love, a form of *phileo*. Philo love is affectionate and friendly. Thus, it is not as strong as agape love. Peter is saying to Jesus, “*Jesus, I like you. But in light of my recent actions, it would be unfair of me to claim I was more committed to you than the other disciples. I did that before, but I will not make that claim any longer.*”

The second time Jesus asks the question he still uses *agapao*, but he drops the “more than these.” Jesus doesn’t want Peter to compare himself to the other disciples anymore. After all,

John had been with Jesus during the crucifixion, something Peter didn't do. Jesus is asking Peter, *"Forget about them, Simon. Don't worry if you are or aren't as committed as some of them. Would you say you are somewhat committed to me?"*

Once again Peter responds in the affirmative, but only after he changes the word for love back to *phileo*. Peter says, *"You know I like you."* Peter will not claim that he is completely committed to Jesus. He did that before, then failed to demonstrate that commitment.

The text tells us the third time Jesus asks the question, it "hurt" Peter. Now Jesus uses Peter's own word, *phileo*. Jesus is saying, *"Really, Simon? Do you really consider me a friend?"* There is an implication. *"Do friends abandon one another in their hour of utmost need?"*

Peter's response is beautiful. *"Lord, you know all things."* Peter knew that with Jesus' divine vision, he could see right into Peter's heart. Jesus saw that Peter's love for Jesus was far from perfectly committed or even perfectly affectionate. Peter knew Jesus could see that; however, Peter also knew Jesus could see his faith. Peter trusted that his salvation did not depend on him loving Jesus perfectly, nor being perfectly committed to Jesus' cause. Peter knew his salvation depended only on Jesus loving *him* perfectly and being perfectly committed to Peter's eternal well-being. The love that Jesus had proven in his death and resurrection moved Peter to love and trust Jesus more. But now Peter's faith is coupled with humility. Instead of boldly asserting how strong he is, he admits to Jesus how weak he's been.

Jesus response? Complete restoration. Not only was Peter forgiven, but Jesus makes it crystal clear that he wants Peter to continue to serve as an under-shepherd, feeding Christ's lambs and sheep.

Jesus does the same for us, does he not? If Jesus wanted to belittle us, would he not have plenty of ammunition? If Jesus wanted to accuse us of cowardice or sloth or any other sort of ministerial unfaithfulness, would he not have plenty of evidence? Yet Jesus doesn't do that. It is not that he lets our sin slide, pretending it didn't happen. No, he condemns our sin in his Word, often pointedly (like he did with Peter). He calls us to repent. But he does all this lovingly and gently. His love leads us to humbly lift our sins up to him, to confess our continued failings. Jesus responds not just by forgiving us, but by letting us to serve in positions of leadership in his Church, just like Peter. What amazing grace! What gentleness on the part of our Savior.

The Peter Plan, a plan for dealing with membership delinquency, is so named because it attempts to follow Jesus' example as we follow his command, "Feed my sheep." When one of Jesus' sheep is straying... when a member has ceased coming to worship... we want to restore. *The Peter Plan* lays out a path to loving call people to repentance in a way that demonstrates grace and gentleness, the same things Jesus demonstrated to Peter and to us.

May God bless our efforts.