

Do you love me?

By Mark Jurkovich

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, 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."

He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"

He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

He said to him, "Tend My sheep."

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. 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." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me." *John 21:15-19 New King James Version (NKJV)*

Fitting for the Resurrection (Easter) season, while reflecting on a sermon I heard on 1 Corinthians 13, my thoughts drifted to another passage on love. The passage is John 21:15-19 that some Bibles title "Jesus restores Peter". It is a wonderful conversation between Jesus and Peter, but most English translations miss some of the key dynamics of it. The first two times when Jesus asks "Do you love me?", the Greek word used is the word for sacrificial love (agape). But when Peter responds, it is with the word for friendship/affection (phileo). So, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him in the same sacrificial way he loves Peter. But Peter responds that his love right then was not as strong as that. Finally, the third time Jesus asks the question with the same word Peter

has been answering with; "Do you have affection for me?" (NKJV margin notes)

Do you see the honesty and humility in Peter's answer? He is still feeling the shame of his denying Jesus just a short time before where he showed that his love was not as deep as he thought. So, after double checking with Peter by asking the same question twice, he accepts Peter where he is, and asks, "Do you have affection for me?"



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It may seem strange that Jesus then goes on to tell of Peter's eventual death, but perhaps it was also an assurance to Peter that one day his love for Jesus will be that sacrificial love which Jesus has for him (although Peter did not get it at the time, based on his response.)

In the conversation, Jesus gives Peter four commands:

"feed my lambs" (teach the new believers)

"tend my sheep" (serve the believers)

"feed my sheep" (teach the mature believers)

"follow me"

Jesus's giving Peter these commands during the conversation is another indication that he accepted Peter where he was, and could still use him. He takes all of us where we are. And if we follow Him, He will use us as He develops that sacrificial love in us.

Footnote: Some commentators point out that the two Greek words phileo and agape are sometimes used interchangeably, and so these distinctions above are not necessarily valid. Also, Jesus and Peter were likely speaking Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. But I tend to think that when John put these words to paper, that he chose these particular words for a reason. I therefore side with those who believe the distinction is intended in this instance.