

**Wednesday, April 23, 2025 | Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John | John 21:15-19**

**Vs. 15-17** – Though there are some slight differences between each cycle, this passage follows a predictable pattern: question—response—command. John says, “So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.”

To what was Jesus referring when he asked Peter, “Lovest thou me more than these?” There are four possible referents: the fish/gear/boat, the other disciples, the other disciples’ love for Christ, or all the above. Good arguments can be made for each option. In support of the first, this passage closely parallels Peter’s initial invitation to abandon his vocation as a fisherman and become a “fisher of men” (cf. Mat. 4:19). As was argued above (*see notes vs. 3*), the portrayal of this fishing trip is far from positive or completely innocent. So, given the potential for backsliding, it seems appropriate that Peter would have to *recommit* himself to the Lord. Also, though the other disciples are present, they are not explicitly mentioned in this discussion. If Jesus meant the disciples when he said “these,” the connection to the apostles would’ve been more apparent. Lastly, the group had just “dined” on the fish; the most natural understanding of “these” would be that the miraculous catch is in view.<sup>1</sup>

However, most commentators believe Jesus referred to the other disciples, whether the apostles themselves or the measure of their love for Christ (options 2 & 3).<sup>2</sup> If Jesus addressed Peter’s love for fishing, it would be strange that he did not call out the other apostles. Also, though the apostles are not explicitly referenced in this section, that a comparison is being made to them is not outside the realm of possibility. Without referencing his fellow apostles, Peter had once compared his love to the others, saying, “Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended” (Matt. 26:33). As with Peter’s words then so it is with Jesus’ words now. After all that had transpired, had Peter’s love for Christ diminished or increased? Did he still claim to love Jesus more than “all men”? Or had Peter’s confidence totally evaporated? The Lord’s inquiry would settle the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1236.

<sup>2</sup> Morris (1995), p. 768; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 405; Kruse (2017), p. 461-462; Klink (2016), p. 913; Thompson (2015), p. 441; Carson (1991), p. 675-676; Köstenberger (2004), p. 596.

While options 1-3 have their merits, given the ambiguity of the term "these," the fourth seems best. Like all followers of Jesus, Peter must love Jesus more than anyone else (cf. Matt. 10:37); this, of course, means loving the Lord more than his profession/possessions (cf. Mat. 6:24). And soon, Peter will learn that he's destined for martyrdom (vs. 18-19). His love for the Lord had better be of the highest quality if he is to face such an end head on.

Ultimately, what the term "these" refers to is irrelevant. After the initial question, Jesus drops the comparison terminology completely. Questions two and three do not seem to have things or the other apostles in mind; instead, they directly address Peter's love for Jesus. And a love for Christ is at the heart of this passage. If one's love for Christ is settled, all other loves will be set in their proper place and rank. As Augustine put it, "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved." So, whatever the comparison may be, Jesus' point is clear enough: Peter's *first* love must be established.

But how could Peter prove his love? He had learned the hard way that talk was cheap. All Peter had to base his claim on was Jesus' *omniscience*. He says to the Lord, "Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." The only thing that could confirm Peter's love was Jesus' intimate knowledge of Peter. That the Lord responded with, "Feed my lambs," is confirmation that Peter did indeed love Jesus. One can only imagine Peter's relief at those words, a profound emotional weight that must have lifted from his shoulders. Doubtless, he meant what he said, just as he did when he sat in the Upper Room, but only Jesus, who knew everything from beginning to end, could confirm if Peter's words would prove true this time. To get a commission, as opposed to a condemnation, must've alleviated Peter's fear that he might deny Jesus again.

As is well known, "love" translates two separate Greek terms: **ἀγαπάω** (*agapaō*) and **φιλέω** (*phileō*). Jesus uses both words, while Peter only uses the latter. Given the variation in terms, many have thought a contrast is intended. The argument goes something like this: *Agapaō* is equivalent to the sort shown by God. *Phileō* is equivalent to a love shared between friends. Jesus' repeated use of *agapaō* indicates he's interested in a boundless kind of love, while Peter's repeated use of *phileō* indicates he's only interested in a more pedestrian kind of love.

But there is a problem with this interpretation. As Louw-Nida explains,

"It would be quite wrong to assume that φιλέω and φιλία refer only to human love, while ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη refer to divine love. Both sets of terms are used for the total

range of loving relations between people, between people and God, and between God and Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there is little to no discernible difference in *meaning* between *agapaō* and *phileō*. Admittedly, in the NT, the command to “love” always uses *agapaō* and never *phileō*, which must count for something. But even so, the two terms convey the same basic notion: *love*.<sup>4</sup> Any attempt to base one’s interpretation on the differences between *agapaō* and *phileō* must base their arguments on semantics, a notoriously problematic foundation in any era. However, it is especially troublesome when dealing with a language that hasn’t been in vogue for over 2,000 years. Thus, while there may be some subtle play on words, it is best to consider other factors. After all, John uses multiple terms for “fish” (three to be exact)<sup>5</sup> and “feed”<sup>6</sup> with little variation in meaning. It is far more likely that the different terms for love illustrate John’s affinity for synonyms than something else.<sup>7</sup>

While knowing which terms were used is important, it is just as important to note how many times they were used. *Thrice* Jesus asked Peter about his love; *thrice*, the lead apostle affirmed his love. As mentioned (*see notes vs. 9*), the charcoal fire combined with this threefold exchange is meant to recall Peter’s threefold denial (cf. 18:15-27). This explains why Peter was “grieved” after the Lord’s third question; he knew what Jesus referenced.<sup>8</sup> As Carson puts it, “As he had disowned Jesus three times, so Jesus requires this elementary yet profound confession three times.”<sup>9</sup> Peter had publicly *renounced* his allegiance, and the Lord was allowing him to *reassert* his allegiance publicly.

But more than that, with six apostles looking on, the Lord *thrice commissioned* Peter to “feed [his] sheep.” The lead apostle’s failure was a ticking time bomb; eventually, it would’ve caused division or, worse, compromised the apostolic witness. The first thing the disciples did after Jesus’ ascension was to frame Judas’ betrayal within the framework of God’s sovereignty and to

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<sup>3</sup> Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida, [\*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains\*](#), electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 1:293. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996; Köstenberger (2004), p. 596, points out that **ἀγαπάω** is used in passages where human, and not divine, love is in view (cf. 3:19; 12:43) and **φιλέω** is used in passages where divine, and not human, love is in view (cf. 5:20; 16:27); Carson (1991), p. 677, points out that in 2 Tim. 4:10 Paul says that “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved [**ἀγαπάω**] this present world...” Such use in a carnal context argues against the claim that *agapaō* is only divine love.

<sup>4</sup> For **ἀγαπάω/ἀγάπη**, see BDAG, p. 6-7. For **φιλέω/φιλία**, see BDAG, p. 1056-1057.

<sup>5</sup> Klink (2016), p. 897.

<sup>6</sup> Vs. 15, 17 use **βόσκω** (*boskō*) while vs. 16 uses **ποιμαίνω** (*poimanō*).

<sup>7</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1236, “Rhetorically skilled writers regularly employed synonyms for the sake of rhetorical variation, and the Fourth Gospel uses ἀγαπάω and φιλέω interchangeably.”

<sup>8</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1235, explains that the Greek term translated as “grieved” is a “strong term John elsewhere uses of the disciples’ sorrow over Jesus’ death” (cf. 16:20).

<sup>9</sup> Carson (1991), p. 678.

elect a replacement (cf. Ac. 1:15-26). The testimony of the apostles was vital to the success of the gospel. Judas' betrayal and Peter's denials had to be addressed so the gospel message would not be compromised. That Jesus restored Peter in the presence of six well-respected eyewitnesses would quell any discord, ensuring the church remained unified. After all, it was a Near Eastern custom to reiterate a matter "three times before witnesses in order to convey a solemn obligation, especially with regard to contracts conferring rights or legal disposition."<sup>10</sup> Thus, though this conversation was a painful reminder of Peter's past, it was necessary to reinstate the man to his former position as the lead apostle.

Catholic interpreters see this passage as the Johannine equivalent to Matt. 16:19, wherein they argue that Petrine primacy was established.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, Protestants disagree with this interpretation. This passage isn't about elevating Peter's position but, as has already been argued, about *reinstating* him to gospel ministry.<sup>12</sup> The figure of a shepherd feeding sheep is intended to illustrate Peter's authority within the church; this is true. But to say it asserts his *superiority* over those who held the same position is to read too much into the text. Also, such a view ignores a host of other passages. Namely, Peter himself said that he is but one "elder" among many while Christ alone is the "*chief* [emphasis added] Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:1-4).<sup>13</sup> If Peter had been *the* Vicar of Christ, he would have had a more prominent view of his position and his supposed successors.

Ultimately, this passage is relevant to *every* pastor of *every* age. To love Christ and feed the flock of God are the primary characteristics of an elder. Those two things are intrinsically linked to the pastoral role. A minister who does not love Jesus won't provide God's word to God's people. Likewise, a minister who doesn't provide God's word to God's people can hardly claim to love Jesus. But an overseer who faithfully and consistently preaches the Scriptures passionately loves the Son of God. Just as a good under-shepherd, out of reverence to his

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<sup>10</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 597.

<sup>11</sup> Engen, J. Van, "Peter, Primacy of," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second Edition, Edited by Walter Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2001), p. 910, "Roman Catholics believe that Peter's was a permanent office instituted by Christ and conferred upon the apostle's successors in the see of Rome, and that his primacy in the primitive church has fallen now to the bishops (popes) of Rome. Most pointedly, at Vatican Council I in 1870 the first Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, also known as *Pastor aeternus*, made it a matter of Catholic faith that Christ conferred primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church directly and without mediation (this against conciliarists) upon Peter, that the Petrine office and its primacy persist through the ages in the bishops of Rome, and that they therefore possess universal, ordinary jurisdiction over all of Christ's church."

<sup>12</sup> Carson (1991), p. 679; Klink (2016), p. 912, explains that the "dominant interpretation in the history of the church" is that this passage is about Peter's reinstatement.

<sup>13</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 596.

master, leads the flock to pastures green, a good pastor, out of affection to the Lord, will lead the Christians to the Bible.

**Vs. 18-19** – With Peter's love confirmed, and his position reestablished, the Lord gives insight into the lead apostle's future. Jesus did indeed know Peter's heart. But he also knows where that love will lead him. Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." The lead apostle finally knows what Jesus meant when he said, "Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards" (13:36).<sup>14</sup> In ancient times, "stretch forth thy hands" referred to crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> To ensure his readers do not miss this point, John interrupts the conversation with a parenthetical statement: "This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God" (cf. 12:33). That the Beloved Apostle says that the Lead Apostle "glorified God" in his death not only characterizes martyrdom as an honorable thing, in the same vein as Christ's own crucifixion (cf. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1), but it also confirms Jesus' prediction. Peter died sometime during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD).<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to say if, as the legend goes, he was crucified upside down. This claim did not arise until the late second century in the "Acts of Peter," which is "one of the five ancient apocryphal Acts that relate the missionary activities of the apostles beyond the canonical account."<sup>17</sup> What is undeniable, at least from a Scriptural (cf. 2 Pet. 1:14) and a historical standpoint, is that Peter died for his faith.<sup>18</sup> John, writing after 70AD, wants his readers to know that the Lord predicted Peter's death roughly *three decades* before it happened. This is yet another example of Jesus' divine foreknowledge.

Just as Jesus predicted Peter's denial, he predicted his martyrdom. The same one who once dissociated himself from Christ will die in the *same way* that Christ died. He who, as a young man, had once declared that he'd follow Jesus to the cross (cf. 13:37) but failed to do so will, as an old man, fulfill that promise. Indeed, in Peter, we find a cowardly man who became a courageous martyr. Still, it is naive to think this revelation did not initially make Peter fearful. To suddenly know the nature of one's death is a heavy load for the mind to bear. Perhaps this is

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<sup>14</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 598.

<sup>15</sup> Carson (1991), p. 679; Keener (2003), 2:1237.

<sup>16</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 599.

<sup>17</sup> Callon, Callie, "Acts of Peter," July 28, 2021, *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0285.xml>, [accessed, April 22, 2025].

<sup>18</sup> Aside from John's testimony here, three others confirm Peter's martyrdom: Clement of Rome (30-100 AD), Tertullian (155-220 AD), and Eusebius (260-340 AD).

why Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me" (cf. 1:43). Following the Lord would lead to Peter's death.<sup>19</sup> Even so, Peter can take heart knowing he's following in Jesus' footsteps. And just as Christ died and rose again, so too will Peter. To share in Christ's suffering guarantees a share in Christ's glory (cf. Rom. 8: 17-18). All who bear a cross will wear a crown (cf. Matt. 16:24-26; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Heb. 12:2). As Jone Eareckson Tada so aptly put it,

"The best we can hope for in this life is a knothole peek at the shining realities ahead. Yet a glimpse is enough. It's enough to convince our hearts that whatever sufferings and sorrows currently assail us aren't worthy of comparison to that which waits over the horizon."

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<sup>19</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 599, "The rest of Peter's life must be lived in the shadow of the cross, just as Jesus' was."

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

### **Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 102 | John 21:15-19**

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In tonight's passage, Peter's biggest mistake will be addressed head-on. And though the process is far from pleasant, it is necessary. Peter publicly *renounced* his allegiance, and the Lord will allow him to *reassert* his allegiance publicly. From this point forward, there will be no question that the Lead Apostle truly and dearly loves Jesus Christ. So much so that the Lord predicts Peter will die a martyr. The same one who once dissociated himself from Christ will die in the *same way* that Christ died. He who, as a young man, had once declared that he'd follow Jesus to the cross (cf. 13:37) but failed to do so will, as an old man, fulfill that promise.

Likewise, just as Peter came to know, so all Christians must learn: loving Christ means living in the shadow of a cross.

**Pastor's manuscript can be found here:**

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