

**Serving Christ's Flock
John 21:15-17**

The last time I spoke to you we had just completed John's account of an extraordinary fishing trip recorded for us in **John 21:1-14**, a fishing trip that took place during the post-resurrection ministry of Christ.

In this story while the disciples were waiting for Him, per His instructions, on a specific designated mountain near the Sea of Galilee they apparently got hungry.

But rather than trusting in Christ, that He would in His time provide their necessary food, they chose to trust in themselves. Therefore they left the mountain in order to go on a fishing trip.

Was their fishing trip initially successful? No! Though they had fished all night and though they were skilled fishermen they caught nothing. However, this all dramatically changed early in the morning as they approached the shore when a man, who they later discovered to be Christ, called out to them and told them to cast their net on the right hand side of their boat. And what was the result of that? The result was a miraculous haul of fish.

So, what was Christ's purpose in all this? Why did Christ orchestrate these events as they are recorded for us? Christ orchestrated these events in order to illustrate for us a simple but important truth.

Experiencing the abundant supply of Christ requires us to trust in Him rather than ourselves. And it will be then and only then that we will be able to accomplish His will and to do His work in a manner pleasing to Him. What did Christ say to His disciples in **John 15:5**? **"Apart from me you can do nothing."** Do we believe this? We need to.

If we are here this morning and believe that we can accomplish His will and do His work in our strength and apart from His supply, we are only fooling ourselves. And don't think that He will let us get away with this. He will humble us just as He humbled His disciples here in **John 21:1-14**.

But Christ is not yet done using the occasion that was introduced to us in **John 21:1-14** to further prepare His disciples for future ministry. This brings us to **John 21:15-25** and to the completion of our study of the Gospel of John, a study that we began well over five years ago and Lord willing, a study that we will be complete in three weeks. So, what truths are contained in these last few verses?

Christ, in addition to the truth He illustrated for His disciples by the miracle in **John 21:1-14**, also chose to outline for Peter, with the miracle of the fishing expedition as a backdrop, three additional truths.

This leads us to the question that we will be seeking to answer over the next few weeks: What are the three truths Christ outlined for Peter in John 21:15-25 that every faithful disciple of Christ needs to understand? This is the question that we will be seeking to answer. So what is the first truth?

We need to understand that our love for Christ should lead us to serve Christ's flock (John 21:15-17).

Let me read for you **John 21:15-17**. “**So when they had finished breakfast, 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, ‘Tend My lambs.’ (16) He said to him again 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, ‘Shepherd, My sheep.’ (17) 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 all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’”**

So let me ask you a question. Did Christ expect Peter's profession of love for Him to lead Peter to serve His flock? And what is the answer? Absolutely! This was the expectation of Christ.

And hopefully before we conclude this message this morning you will see that Christ's expectation for those who profess love for Him, even today, has not changed. So now let us begin to look at this passage and the words more carefully.

And how does it begin? It begins with these words, **“So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John.’”** Now notice how Jesus addressed Peter? He addressed him as **“Simon, son of John”** and the way Jesus chose to address Peter is very significant. And why do I say this?

Christ addressing Simon Peter as “Simon, son of John” is something that Christ had not done since He had changed Simon’s name to Peter in Matthew 16:13-18.

And why had Christ changed Simon’s name? Christ changed Simon’s name to Peter (PETROS) meaning “a small stone” after he confessed, early on in Christ’s ministry, that Jesus was the **“Christ the son of the living God,”** and ever since that time this is how Christ addressed Peter. But this is not how Christ addressed Peter here in **John 21:15.**

So why did Christ address Peter as He did here in this verse? Christ addressed Peter as “Simon, son of John,” I believe, because his recent denials of Christ were more consistent with his name prior to his confession than his name subsequent to his confession. Therefore, when Jesus chose to address Peter as “Simon, son of John,” He was in effect mildly rebuking him.

Did Peter overlook this mild form of rebuke? No, I don’t believe that he did as will be evidenced by Peter’s response to the question that Jesus will now ask him here in **John 21:15**, and will ask him again in a little different way in **John 21:16**, and will finally ask him in yet another way for a third time in **John 21:17.**

So now let us continue to read **John 21:15** and consider the question that Jesus asked Peter immediately after addressing him as **“Simon, son of John.”** And what was the question? **“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”**

When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him more than “these,” He was referring to His other disciples who were still there with them after having eaten breakfast. This I believe is the best way to understand the question that Christ was now asking Peter. Or in other words, “Simon, son of John, do

you love me more than these other disciples who are now standing here with us?”

Now that was a pointed question. But why would Jesus have asked such a pointed question? All we have to do in order to understand why Jesus asked Peter this particular question is to go back just a few days to the night before Christ’s crucifixion and consider certain very boastful words that Peter spoke to Christ in front of these very disciples. And what were those words? Let me now read for you **Matthew 26:31-33**. **“Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, “I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.” (32) But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.’ (33) But Peter said to Him, ‘Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.’”**

What a boastful statement! Not only had Peter challenged the words of Christ, but also he elevated his love and devotion for Christ above the other disciples. In effect he was saying, “John may fail you, James may fail you, Andrew may fail you, but I won’t fail you Lord. I love you too much. I love you more than “these.” But he did fail! Didn’t he? He failed in a very big way.

Therefore, Jesus in effect by His question to Peter in John 21:15 is giving Peter the opportunity to demonstrate a humility that he had failed to demonstrate to Christ and his fellow disciples in Matthew 26:31-33.

So will Peter seize this opportunity and demonstrate a newfound humility that he so sorely lacked in the upper room when he boasted that even if every other disciple were to fall away he would not? And I believe that the answer to this question is yes!

Peter, seizing the opportunity afforded to him by Christ, demonstrated a new sense of humility both by what he chose not to say and by what he chose to say.

So how did Peter’s response to Christ’s question demonstrate a newfound sense of humility by what he did not say? Peter’s newfound sense of humility was demonstrated by what he did not say when he, in his response

to Christ's question, chose to avoid any comparison between himself and the other disciples.

He could have said, "Yes, Lord I love you more than these" rather than simply saying, "Yes, Lord, You know I love you," but obviously his recent failures had taken the wind out of his sails, and as a consequence of this he avoided any comparison between himself and the other disciples, very much in contrast to what he was willing to do in **Matthew 26:31-33** when he boasted that even if every the other disciples would fall away he would not. But we are not done with highlighting Peter's newfound sense of humility.

Peter also demonstrated his newfound sense of humility when he chose to use a different word for love in his response than Christ had used in his question.

Jesus had asked, "**Simon, son of John, do you love me** [or in the Greek, do you AGAPAO me] **more than these.**" And how did Peter respond? "**Lord, you know that I love You** [or in other words in the Greek, you know that I PHILEO you]." In other words, Peter chose to use a different word for love in his response than Christ had used in His question. And I believe this is significant and does in fact reflect a newfound humility on the part of Peter.

So, what do I mean by this? The word Jesus used for love in John 21:15 was the Greek word AGAPAO that focuses on the commitment to unconditionally and sacrificially serve another. In other words, Jesus was asking Peter, "Are you prepared to unconditionally and sacrificially serve me?" This is what Jesus was asking.

And of course earlier if Jesus had asked this question of Peter in the upper room I would have to assume based on **Matthew 26:31-33** that Peter would have quickly responded, "Yes, Lord, I AGAPAO you, I will unconditionally and sacrificially serve you." But clearly Peter after his recent failures was no longer willing to use the word AGAPAO to express his love for Christ therefore Peter changed the word when he gave his response. And what was the word that Peter used?

The word for love that Peter used when he responded to Christ was the Greek word PHILEO, which focuses more on the affection that we feel for an individual than our commitment to them.

So let me ask you this question. Did Peter love Christ with AGAPAO love? Was Peter prepared to serve Christ unconditionally and sacrificially? I believe he was, but I also I believe in light of his recent failures that he could simply not bring himself to use that word.

So how will Jesus respond to Peter's profession? He receives it. Christ knows that Peter loves him, not only with a PHILEO love, but I believe also with an AGAPAO love and Jesus responded accordingly.

Christ, after accepting Peter's verbal expression of love for Him in John 21:15, commanded Peter to tend His lambs. Isn't this exactly what the verse tells us? Doesn't the verse tell us that after Peter professed his love for Christ He told Peter, "**Tend My lambs?**"

Tending Christ's lambs was not an option for Peter. This was exactly what Christ expected of him in light of his professed love for Him.

So what happened next? Let us read **John 21:16**. "**He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?'**" Or in other words, "Simon, son of John do you AGAPAO Me?" And how does Peter respond? He responded in the same way as he had responded before. "**He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love you.'**" Or in other words, "Yes, Lord; you know that I PHILEO."

So once again we see Peter, in light of his recent past failures, unwilling to confess his love for Christ using the word AGAPAO even though that was the kind of love I believe Peter at this moment in time did in fact possess and that Christ knew he possessed.

And how did Christ respond to this second profession of love by Peter? Christ, after accepting Peter's verbal expression of love for Him in John 21:16, commanded Peter to shepherd His sheep.

Again we see that shepherding Christ's sheep was not an option for Peter. It was not an option the first time and it is not an option this second time. This was exactly what Christ expected of him in light of his professed love for Him. So now what happens?

You might think that Christ would have thought that He had hammered on Peter enough but as we will see obviously Christ did not think so. In fact, Christ in **John 21:17** will ask Peter for a third time whether or not he loved Him. But this time Christ did not ask Peter, “Do you AGAPAO Me (Do you love Me unconditionally and sacrificially)?” He rather asked Peter “Do you PHILEO Me (Do you love Me with a deep affection)?” Christ asking this same question in this way, even challenging Peter’s profession of a deep affection for Him, deeply impacted Peter.

It caused Peter to be deeply grieved. What does **John 21:17** tell us? “**Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ... ‘Do you love Me?’**” And because Peter was deeply grieved he made an appeal to Christ. So let us go back one more time to the verse and see what it says.

“And he said to Him, ‘Lord, you know all things; You know that I love [PHILEO] You [I have a very deep affection for you].” Did Christ know this? Yes! He knew that Peter loved Him with deep affection and He also knew that Peter loved Him with an unconditional and sacrificial love.

But it was important for Peter to go through this cathartic experience in front of Christ and His fellow disciples here in **John 21:15-17** so that he, in seizing the opportunity that Christ through His questioning gave him, might demonstrate to Christ, to his fellow disciples and to himself that he was a new and better version of the old Peter.

And so how did Christ respond this time to Peter’s latest profession of love for Him in **John 21:17**?

Christ, accepting Peter’s verbal expression of love for Him in John 21:17, commanded Peter to tend His sheep.”

Tending Christ’s lambs once again was not an option for Peter. This was exactly what Christ expected of him, in light of his professed love, for Him. And this is exactly what Peter faithfully did until the day of his death. He, as an expression of his love for Christ, served Christ’s flock by serving as a faithful shepherd.

So let me ask you a question. If Christ were here today and were to ask you, “Do you love Me,” what would you say? Hopefully you would say the same thing as Peter, “Yes, Lord you know that I love you.”

So now let me ask you another question. Do you think that Christ, in light of your professed love for Him, might have a certain expectation of you in terms of how He might want you to serve His flock, or in other words, His church? And your answer of course should be what? Your answer should be yes!

What did Paul tell the Roman Christians in **Romans 12:4-6**? “**For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, (5) so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (6) Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.**” Not maybe, not might, not when we feel like it, but we are to do it. This is Christ’s expectation that Christ has of those who profess love for Him.

For Peter, Christ expected him, as an expression of his professed love, to serve His flock as a faithful shepherd. What is Christ’s expectation of you? What gift or gifts has He given you that He expects you to use in serving His flock, or in other words, His church as an expression of your love?

May God give us the grace to manifest our love for Christ in faithful service to His flock.