

THE GREAT QUESTION ABOUT A DISCIPLE'S LOVE AND DEVOTION

JOHN 21:15–17

Introduction

This is a critical passage for the church and its ministers. It has one great lesson: love is the one basic essential for ministry. Without love, ministry counts for nothing in God's eyes. This passage concerns three questions asked by our Lord.

- I. After the meal, Jesus focused on Peter (v. 15).
- II. Do you love me more than these (v. 15)?
- III. Do you love me with God's love — love me enough to feed my people (v. 16)?
- IV. Do you love me as a loyal brother — love me with agape love or phileo love (v. 17)?

(Note: this passage is best studied as a whole, comparing each question with the other two questions. Because of this, all three points are studied together and not by separate points. It is also helpful to see *Love*, Jn. 13:35-35; 14:15.)

JOHN 13:34–35 LOVE AS JESUS CHRIST LOVED

“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34-35

The new commandment is to love *as Christ loved*. Note several points.

1. This is not the old commandment, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” It is not a human, neighbourly love that is being commanded. This *new commandment* was given to *disciples only*. It is the spiritual love that is to exist between believers as brothers and sisters and as servants of God who minister together.
2. The love being commanded is the love of Jesus Himself which is the love of God Himself, the love that can be shed abroad in our hearts only by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 5:5). It is not the normal physical love among human neighbours which is being commanded by God. It is a spiritual love that is wrought only by the Spirit of God.

Note: the distinctiveness of this love is that it is the love of Jesus Himself that dwells in the heart of the believer. Only the Spirit of God can put the love of Jesus there within the heart of the believer. The Holy Spirit can create within the believer the love of Jesus Himself, the very same love which Jesus had while here on earth. The love of Jesus is...

- the love of *spiritual being*: the love that causes one to hunger after union with God and God's people.
- the love of *spiritual life*: the love that shares the same life with all believers, both abundant and eternal life.
- the love of *spiritual union*: the love that binds and ties believers together in life and purpose.
- the love of *spiritual attachment or fellowship*: the love that shares needs and blessings and joys and sorrows and gifts together.

The Holy Spirit can create within the believer a love that can melt and mould his heart to the hearts of other believers. But note: it is a commandment; therefore, it is conditional. The Holy Spirit *can* create such a love, but believers *have to receive it*. When the love of Jesus dwells in the heart of a believer, several things happen. The believer has a love that *causes* him...

- to bind his life to the lives of other believers
 - to tie his life to the same purpose as other believers
 - to surrender his will and to be of the same mind as other believers
 - to understand and feel with other believers
 - to forgive other believers — always
 - to sacrifice himself for other believers — always
 - to seek the welfare of other believers before his own
 - to deny self completely
3. The new commandment is the mark of a true disciple. The distinguishing mark of a true believer is not the normal human love of neighbours, not even the love of brothers and sisters or of husband and wife. It is the spiritual and supernatural love of Jesus Himself that dwells within the life of the believer. By this love shall all men know that a person is a *true* disciple of the Lord.

John 15:12 “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

1 Pet 1:22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

1 John 4:7-8 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. □

I. *John 21:15 Ministry of Peter*

The meal was finished. Jesus and the disciples were sitting around talking and sharing together after the meal. Remember four things.

- => Jesus had already met Peter all alone in a private session to discuss Peter's denial and to make sure he was fully restored (see 1 Cor. 15:4-5).
- => Peter's leadership needed to be reinforced publicly among all the disciples. They all knew about Peter's denial.
- => Jesus had to make sure Peter would never deny Him nor fall back from his mission again.
- => Jesus needed to teach the disciples the one basic essential for ministry. None of them, not even a charismatic leader such as Peter, could ever minister and bear godly fruit unless he *loved* the flock of God. A man may be the most gifted person in the world, but he is nothing and can do nothing of value *in God's eyes* unless he first loves (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3). Abilities, talents, gifts, commitments, good deeds and works just do not qualify a man before God nor make a man acceptable to God. The one great thing — in fact the only thing — that makes a man acceptable and that qualifies him to serve God is *love*.

These are the reasons for what Jesus now did. He turned to focus upon Peter. Note: He called Peter by his full name, Simon Peter, and reminded him that he was the son of Jonas (see Jn. 1:42). This did two things.

- => It attracted everyone's attention, stressing that what was to follow was important — more important than usual.
- => It reminded Peter where he had come from. He was of humble beginnings, from a lowly father. All that Peter had become and would become was of God. Peter was *nothing apart from Christ* and *nothing apart from the mission he was about to receive*.

Thought 1. A man must know that he is nothing apart from Christ. How many persons would have more in life — more purpose, more meaning, more significance — if they would only surrender to Christ? How many have actually been called by Christ and rejected His call; therefore, they have missed out on their purpose in life and on making their contribution to society and to the world?

II. *John 21:15 Love and Commitment*

There is a difference between the three questions Jesus asked of Peter. Question one asked Peter who he loved the most, the Lord Himself or “these.” Just what is meant by “these” is not clear. Jesus could have been pointing to the disciples sitting around. If so, He meant, do you love me more than you love these men or your family? Or, Jesus could have been pointing to the fish, the nets, and the boat. If so, He was asking, do you love me more than your profession and career (see Jn. 21:3)? Perhaps Scripture is unclear at this point in order to make “these” apply to anything and everything in our lives.

Question two asked Peter if he loved with God's love. This is seen in the Greek word for love. Jesus used one word, but Peter used another. Jesus used the word *agape*, the highest form of love, the love of God Himself. But Peter did not reply, "Yes, Lord, I *agape* you." He said, "Yes, Lord, I *phileo* you." That is, I love you just like a brother; I love you with a brotherly love." *Phileo* means brotherly love, the love between two brothers.

Question three probed the genuineness and loyalty of Peter's love. Here Jesus descended to the human level of love. He used *phileo*. He simply asked Peter, "Peter, do you really love, *phileo* me — even as a brother?" And questioning the loyalty of his love grieved Peter. But Jesus assured Peter that his love would one day reach the ultimate height (Jn. 21:18). Peter would be called upon to demonstrate *agape* love, the sacrificial love of God. Peter would be called upon to die for Christ, to give his life for preaching the love of God to those who do not care for it and who react violently against it.

Jesus was preparing His disciples for a new kind of love that was yet to come. Up to the time of Christ's death and ascension, the greatest love known to man was *phileo love*, the willingness of a man to die for a friend. But in Christ, God was showing the world a new kind of love — *agape love*. *Agape love* is a love so new that a new meaning had to be given to the Greek word "*agape*." *Agape* became the love that was willing to give and die even for an enemy. The early Christian leaders recognized this new dimension of love, so they lifted the meaning of *agape love* up to God's love for the world. *Agape love* is the highest level of love possible; it is the love of God: "God [who] so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16).

Agape love is Christ's dying...

- for people who have no power (Rom. 5:6)
- for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6)
- for sinners (Rom. 5:8)
- for the enemies of God (Rom. 5:10)

Peter and the disciples did not yet understand this. They could not because the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, and *agape love* is poured out in the heart only by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

III. *John 21:16 Ministry in the Church*

Three times Peter was charged to feed and tend the flock of God. If Peter really loved the Lord, then he would carry out the commission to shepherd God's people. Note three things.

1. Scripture identifies the lambs and sheep as the flock of God, that is, as the church of God. Jesus was talking about feeding His church. His disciples within the church.

Acts 20:28 *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

Note: in this verse (Acts 20:28) the charge is to guard oneself as well as the flock of God. This is similar to what Jesus was saying to Peter: if you love me, guard yourself and be faithful; feed my lambs and sheep, my church.

2. The flock of God is made up of both *lambs* (arnia, v. 15) and *sheep* (probatia, v. 16-17).

=> Lambs: children, young converts, the handicapped or special cases, believers who need special attention.

=> Sheep: mature believers, believers who have walked and grown in the Lord for a long time.

When He comes, He is coming to separate the nations (Mt. 25:31-33). Throughout history, there has been a mixture of sheep and goats, of good and evil. The tares and the wheat have grown together. The sinner and the godly have lived together...

- in the same world
- in the same cities
- in the same churches
- in the same nations
- in the same employments
- in the same families

When Christ comes, however, there is going to be a separation — a separation of the good from the bad, of the sheep from the goats (Mt. 13:49; Eze. 34:17).

3. The ministry to the flock or church is twofold.

a. The first ministry is to feed (boske, v. 15, 17).

=> To give food, teaching both the milk and meat of the Word.

1 Pet 2:2-3 *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

Heb 5:12-14 *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

=> To guide into the study of the Word — presenting oneself approved to God.

2 Tim 2:15 *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

Note that the word used for feeding (boske) is the word used for both the lambs (v. 15) and the sheep (v. 17). Both the lambs and sheep are to be fed on the same Word and fed in the same way.

Jer 15:16 *When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.*

Job 23:12 *I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.*

Deu 8:3 *He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (see Mt. 4:4)*

Psa 119:103 *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

- b. The second ministry is to shepherd (poimaine, v.16). Shepherding involves all the works of the ministry.

1 Pet 5:2-3 *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*

The Shepherd leads and shepherds the sheep. He loves them as His own; therefore He must lead them to the green pastures and still waters. He must see that they are nourished and protected and given the very best care possible. (John 10:2-3)

- 1) He feeds the sheep even if He has to gather them in His arms and carry them to the feasting pasture.

Isa 40:11 *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

- 2) He guides the sheep to the pasture and away from the rough places and precipices.

Psa 23:1-4 *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

- 3) He seeks and saves the sheep who get lost.

Mat 18:12 *“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”*

- 4) He protects the sheep. He even sacrifices His life for the sheep.

John 10:11 *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

- 5) He restores the sheep who go astray and returns them to the sheep pen.

1 Pet 2:25 *For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

6) He rewards the sheep for obedience and faithfulness.

1 Pet 5:4 *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

7) He shall keep the sheep separate from the goats.

Mat 25:32-33 *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

IV. John 21:17 Agape Love and Phileo Love

Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him with *agape* love or *phileo* love. The difference between *agape* love and *phileo* love is as follows.

Phileo love is the love of tender affection, of warm and deep feelings within the heart. It is the deep and precious love of those near and dear to one's heart. It is brotherly love, a love between family members, a love that would die for its brother.

Agape love is the love of the mind, of the reason, and of the will. It is a love that is born of choice; one simply chooses to love regardless of feelings. A person may insult, injure, or humiliate; but *agape* love chooses to seek only the highest good for that person. It is sacrificial love, a love that is willing to die even for its enemies.

Agape love means...

- sacrificial giving
- free acceptance (one freely accepts without any expectation of return)
- cherished attachment
- personal commitment
- strong loyalty
- unselfish devotion
- genuine concern
- precious tenderness

Agape love was so new and so unusual that it can be said that after Christ a new word for love had to be created. Jesus' primary interest with Peter was, of course, that he possess *agape* love: the love that comes from reason and will, that controls the corruptible lusts and wandering thoughts of life, that puts a willingness within a man to serve and to die for all men — even for a person's enemies. Even the enemies of God must hear the gospel and have an opportunity for salvation. However, the fact that Jesus also used *phileo* love with Peter shows that God wants the love of man's warm instinctive feelings as well.

Agape love means at least eight things.

1. *Agape* love is not only a love of emotions. It is a matter of the mind as well as of the heart, of the will as well as of the emotions.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Rom 5:6-8 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

1 John 4:9-10 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

2. Agape love is God's love — His very nature. It is the love that God extended toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Rom 5:8, 10 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

1 John 4:7-10, 16 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

3. Agape love is a seed that can be planted in the heart only by Christ. It is a fruit of the Spirit of God.

Rom 5:5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

4. Agape love is the great love that God holds for His own dear Son.

John 15:10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

John 17:26 “I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

5. Agape love was perfectly expressed when God gave up His own Son to die for man.

2 Cor 5:14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

Eph 2:4 *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy.*

Eph 3:19 *And to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Eph 5:2 *And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

6. Agape love is the love which holds believers together. For three years Jesus Himself had held the apostles together. Now that He was about to leave them, what was going to keep them together and keep them at the task? One thing: the new commandment — agape love. Agape love is the love believers are to have for one another.

John 13:33-35 *“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

1 John 3:17-18 *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

7. Agape love is the love which believers are to have for all men.

1 Cor 16:14 *Do everything in love.*

1 Th 3:12 *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*

2 Pet 1:7 *And to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.*

- a. Agape love seeks the welfare of all.

Rom 15:2 *Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.*

- b. Agape love works no ill to its neighbour.

Rom 13:8-10 *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

- c. Agape love seeks opportunities to do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith.

Gal 6:10 *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

Col 3:12-14 *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (see 1 Cor.13:1f)*

8. *Agape love is proven by obedience to Christ. Doing as one wishes instead of doing as God wills shows that one does not have agape love.*

John 14:15, 21, 23 *“If you love me, you will obey what I command. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” Jesus replied. “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”*

John 15:10 *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.*

1 John 2:5 *But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him.*

1 John 5:3 *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.*

2 John 1:6 *And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. ■*