

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

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Scripture: John 21

John 21: 1-17

"21 After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

*⁴ But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ So Jesus *said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." ⁶ And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. ⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish.*

*⁹ So when they got out on the land, they *saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus *said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." ¹¹ Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.*

¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise. ¹⁴ This is now the third time that Jesus ^[e] was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

*¹⁵ 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."*

I find myself drawn back to another scene. I want you to picture it.

Jesus has just been taken away. He's brought to the High Priest's home. And in the courtyard, a group of soldiers sit around warming themselves in the cold of the night. And Peter, trying to stay close, yet not too close, slips in and joins them. Then out of nowhere, a voice breaks the stillness: "This man was also with Him." Caught off guard, Peter quickly responds, almost instinctively, "Woman, I do not know Him." A little later, another voice presses in, "You also are one of them." and again he denies it, "Man, I am not." Then comes the third voice, more insistent, more certain, "Certainly, this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." This time, Peter doesn't just deny; he protests vehemently, "Man, I don't know what you are saying." And in that very moment, while he is still speaking, the rooster crows.

But perhaps the most disturbing detail in that entire narrative is this: At that moment, the Lord turns and looks at Peter. At the very moment of his denial, at the sound of the rooster, at the collapse of all his bold promises, Jesus looks at him. I don't think Peter ever got used to hearing a rooster after that.

I feel for Peter in this passage because by the time we arrive in this scene in John 21, quite some days have elapsed since his denial. And Peter has been living with it. This is the same Peter who once said, "Even if everyone else falls away, I never will. I will lay down my life for you." He meant those words. He loved Jesus deeply. He was sincere, but sincerity doesn't always translate into strength. Jesus, knowing his frailty, had told him, "Peter, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And Peter had done exactly that.

Now, imagine what it must have been like for him in the days that followed. Every day, perhaps replaying that moment in his mind; the courtyard, the questions, the fear, the denial, and then the sound of the rooster crowing.

The weight of failure can often linger like that. It doesn't leave easily. And what is striking is that even though Jesus has already appeared to the disciples, this particular failure has not yet been addressed. Peter has seen the risen Lord, but he has not heard anything about that night.

When something like that sits unresolved in our lives, it has a way of shaping how we begin to see ourselves. Often, when we are living with that kind of inner weight, failure, guilt, disappointment, our instinct is not to press forward, but to retreat. We don't usually step into something new. We step back into something familiar. And that is exactly what Peter does. "I'm going fishing," he said.

On the surface, it sounds harmless. After all, fishing is what Peter knows. It's his whole life, his skill, his comfort zone. But there's more going on here. This is not just about catching fish. This is about returning to something that requires very little emotional engagement. Fishing allows him to move, to act, to do something with his hands while his heart remains untouched. It's a place where he doesn't have to deal with the deeper questions. It's a place where he doesn't have to confront his failure.

And if we're honest, we do the same thing. When something is unsettled within us, when we are carrying disappointment or guilt, we often retreat into things that are familiar, predictable, and controllable, and often a habit of something that was in the past. We throw ourselves into that, whether it's work or into routines or habits that keep us occupied, but not transformed. We busy ourselves with what we can manage, because dealing with what we cannot manage feels too difficult at that time. So we choose activity over reflection, familiarity over calling. We say in our own way, "I'm going fishing."

And others often join us in that drift. The disciples say, "We'll go with you." There's something about human nature that finds comfort in collective retreat. If one steps back, others begin to follow. And so they go out together into the night doing what they once knew so well. But they catch nothing. All night long – nothing.

There's something almost symbolic about that. When we step out of alignment with what God is doing in our lives, even the things that we are good at can feel strangely empty. The activity may be there. The effort is probably there. But the fruit is missing. What once gave us a sense of purpose, now feels hollow.

Then we read: As morning begins to break, Jesus is standing there on that shore. They don't recognize Him. And He calls out to them, "Children, you don't have any fish, do you?" It almost feels

like a gentle, knowing question. Of course, He knows. But He draws them into acknowledging their emptiness. And they answer “No!” Then He says, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find some.” And they do. there’s no argument this time, no resistance. Perhaps they’re too tired to even question. But they obey. And suddenly, the net is full, so full that they can hardly haul it in.

And in that moment, something clicks. John says to Peter, “It’s the Lord.” and Peter, impulsive as ever, throws himself into the water and heads towards Jesus. There’s something beautiful in that reaction. Despite everything, despite his failure, despite the distance he must feel within himself, his heart still moves towards Jesus.

And when they come ashore, they see something that’s very, very specific. They see a charcoal fire with fish on it, and bread. This detail is not incidental, nor is it put there by accident. The only other place in the New Testament that we read of a charcoal fire is in the courtyard where Peter denied Jesus three times.

In a sense, Jesus is recreating the setting, not to shame Peter, but to redeem the memory. The place of failure is to become the place of restoration. And so, they sit and eat together. There’s a quietness to this moment. The scripture says, “None of them dared to ask, ‘Who are you?’” because they knew it was the Lord.

Then, after breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and He says, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” We’re not told who or what these refers to. And perhaps, that is intentional, because it allows that question to reach into our own lives as well. Do you love Me more than these? More than your work, more than your comfort, more than your ambitions, more than your sense of control – the very things you retreat into when life becomes difficult? Do you love Me more than these?

And Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.” And Jesus responds, “Feed My lambs.” But again, He asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter answers again, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.” And Jesus says, “Shepherd My sheep.” But a third time, He asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Now the Bible says that Peter is grieved, not because Jesus is being harsh, but because the question is going deeper each time, and touching that place of failure. He says, “Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You.” And Jesus says, “Tend My sheep.”

What’s happening here is so profound because Jesus is speaking to Peter about ministry. He’s speaking to him about what must precede that ministry, before the feeding and the looking and the tending of sheep. The real question is a relational question. It’s a question of love. He doesn’t begin with responsibility. He does not begin with assignment. He begins with relationship. The order is intentional. Love must come first. Everything else flows from that. You cannot reverse that order.

You cannot build a life of ministry and service or leadership for God without a living personal love for Him. Otherwise, what you do will become mechanical, burdensome, even empty, and you will burn out. And if you’re ever close to burnout, the only question at that point is what’s your relationship with the Lord? Do you still love Him? Is He still first in your life? is your ministry coming out of a love relationship with God?

But there’s something that’s even more tender in this exchange. When Jesus first asks Peter, He uses a word that speaks of complete, unconditional love. Peter, aware now of his own weakness, does not claim that love. He responds with a simpler word, a love of affection or friendship or brotherly love. No longer is this the brash, boastful Peter. He no longer is over-promising. He simply answers honestly.

- The first time Jesus asks him, He uses this word *agape*. It's the highest form of love. It's a godly love. It's a non-causal love. It's a love that just loves. Peter doesn't respond by saying, "I *agape* You." He says, "Yes, Lord, I *phileo* You." He responds with a brotherly kind of love, a love that is reactionable, a love that is causal. I love you because you love me.
- The second time Jesus asks him, "Peter, do you *agape* me?" And again, he replies, "Yes, Lord. I *phileo* You." And here's the beautiful part.
- The third time Jesus asks him in the Greek, He says, "Do you *phileo* Me?" And Peter says, "You know all things. You know that I *phileo* You."

When God is in the business of restoration, He doesn't stand far away and say: You goofed up there. Now come back to Me. He comes back to where we have messed up, picks us up at the place that we are. We don't have to clean ourselves up to get back to God. That's God's business. He comes to where we are. Do you *phileo* Me? Can you say that at least, Peter? And he says, "Lord, I do. You know that I *phileo* You. I don't know about *agape* love anymore, having denied You. But Lord, I *phileo* You.

God doesn't ask us to come to Him as perfected people. He does not say, "Fix yourself first and then come." He comes to us in our weakness, in our failure, in our incomplete love. And He asks just a simple question: Do you love Me? Do you love Me? Do you love Me? Not, will you do great things for Me? Not, will you prove yourself? Not, will you make up for the past? Just do you love Me?

Beloved, if the answer to that question is yes, even if it is imperfect, even if it is fragile, even if it is still growing, He can take us from where we are to where we need to be.

And so, the question comes to us today. It's not about performance. It's not about our achievements. It's not about how much we have failed or how much we have succeeded. But simply this: Do you love Me? Because if you do, then He will restore what is broken. He will redirect what has drifted.

And He will call you forward again, not based on your strength, but based on His grace. Jesus doesn't call perfect people because none of us are perfect. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. He calls people who love Him, even imperfectly. And then, He shapes us into who we are meant to be.

Maybe today, you can resonate with Peter. Maybe today you're in a place where you have compromised your faith or let Jesus down in some way or given up a value that you know is a kingdom value. Maybe you've done something and now you find yourself hiding just like Adam and Eve. *Then the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God.*

Or maybe, you've gone back to something familiar, something you can do by rote, something that doesn't require too much thought, just to fill your time. And yet, there's that gnawing feeling inside you. Because, beloved, face it! Once you've known Jesus, once you've walked with Him, you cannot ignore that inner pull.

The psalmist writes, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long."

It's like a friendship. If you had a close friend and somehow you let that friend down, it stays with you. You replay it, you regret it, you feel the distance. And sometimes, in earthly relationships, that distance remains. But not so with Jesus. If we are faithless, the Bible says, He remains faithful. Jesus comes to Peter not to condemn him but to restore him.

And He comes to you and me today with the same question: Do you love Me? not why did you fail me? Not how could you do this? But simply, do you love Me? Because if the answer is yes, then restoration is already within reach.

“Return to Me and I will return to you,” says the Lord. Malachi 3:7

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” James 4:8

Maybe today you feel far from home, alone, scared, hiding, just doing something to get through the day, something you don't have to think about. Maybe you've gone back to an old habit, something from your past. Perhaps, if you're honest, you're not even enjoying it anymore, because when you belong to Him, you cannot settle for anything less.

“You have made us for Yourself, O Lord,” the psalmist writes, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Jesus. Maybe today, Jesus is standing on the shore of your life, and He's asking you again: Do you love Me? Do you love Me? And the answer is not complicated. You don't have to explain anything. You don't have to fix anything. You don't have to promise anything. You simply say, like Peter, “Lord, You know all things. You know that I love you.” And the moment you say that, He reaches out, not to push you away, but to draw you back.

“A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish. He restores my soul,” the psalmist says. He forgives if we confess our sins. He's faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us. He welcomes.

Remember the prodigal. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and ran to him. That's the kind of welcome. And isn't that what you want, beloved? Don't you miss that closeness, that nearness, that quiet walking with Him, that sense that He is your Savior, your Lord, your friend, your confidant? Then come back to Him. Respond to Him today, not with any sense of perfection, but with love. And hear His voice again, not condemning, but restoring. Because the same Jesus who restored Peter is calling you home.

So, let me leave you with just this one question, the same question Jesus asked Peter. **Do you love Me more than these?** And that 'these' could be anything – something that you compromised on, something you fell into, something you now hold on to, something you love more than Him, whatever it is. Are you willing to put down your 'these' and say, like Peter, “Yes, Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You.”

Let's pray.

Lord, like Peter, we too say 'You know all things.' You know that we love You. But Lord, we confess that at times, we have loved the 'these' in our lives more than we have loved You. And for that, Lord, we ask Your forgiveness.

Show us, Lord, the things that have taken your place and help us to put them back where they belong. Give us the grace to lay them down and to love you above all else. Respond to us, Lord, with Your incredible love.

Restore to us the joy of our salvation and renew within us a right spirit. Help us, Lord, to walk out of here with a renewed understanding of what it means to be sons and daughters of the Most High

God. Help us to leave this place knowing that our relationship with You is restored, that You love us and that we love You.

In Your name, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.