

“The Chapters in the Story of a Christian Life”

John 21:15-25

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Text Comment

- v.15 Now, the first question in the interpretation of these verses is: what is the reference to “more than these”? “Do you love me more than you love these other men?” could be the thought, but, it seems more likely, that the Lord means, “do you love me more than these other disciples love me?” That sense agrees with the impression we have already been given, earlier in the Gospel, that Peter tended to think over-highly of his own devotion to the Lord. If we combine the information from v. 20 with the impression of this conversation, which followed the breakfast they shared together on the lakeshore, we may imagine that the Lord is walking along the shore with Peter and that the other disciples or some of them were following as the Lord had his talk with Peter.
- v.17 If you have been a Christian very long, by now you have heard a sermon or a Bible study in which the point has been made that the word the NIV translates “love” in vv. 15-17 is not the same in every case. The question is asked and answered three times: Do you love me? In the first two instances, the Lord asks using the verb *agapao*, from which *agape* comes, the great NT word for love, both God’s and ours. But in each case, Peter answers with a different word, *phileo*, another common Greek word for love. In the third case, the Lord asks using *phileo* himself and Peter answers as before, using *phileo*. For generations preachers and Bible study leaders have rung the changes on the supposed difference between the two verbs for love. Supposedly the Lord is asking Peter whether he has the higher form of love for him, *agape*, but Peter, his self-confidence shattered by his three-fold betrayal of Jesus the night of his arrest, can only affirm a lower, weaker form of love. Finally, the Lord descends to that lower level himself in his third question.

But here is a case where a little bit of Greek can lead someone astray. In fact, the verbs are synonyms and are used synonymously in the Gospel of John. There is no evidence that one represents a higher or lower form of love. For example, John refers to himself in the Gospel as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and uses both verbs in that description. Both verbs are used in this Gospel in statements about the love the Father has for the Son, both verbs are used of Jesus’ love for Lazarus, and both verbs are used of the Father’s love for his people. What is more, according to the common interpretation of the difference between the two verbs meaning to love, Peter’s answer to the Lord’s question the first two times should have been “No.” That is, the Lord asked him if he had that higher form of love for him and Peter should have said “No,” meaning that now, in light of all that happened, he could only promise the lower form of love. But that isn’t what Peter says. He says in each case, “Lord, you know I love you.” And he was hurt when the Lord asked the question the third time, as if he hadn’t believed Peter the first two times.

John is known for stylistic variation in his writings. We have another such variation here. In fact, we have several of them. In these three verses he also uses two different words for “know” in v.17, different words for “sheep,” and different words for “feed” or “care for.” The three-fold repetition of the question is for emphasis, surely, but it also, almost certainly, stems from Peter’s three-fold denial of the Lord. He is given an opportunity to take back his denial with a three-fold assertion of his love and loyalty. Interestingly, there is another three-fold repetition of a question to Peter when the Lord speaks to him in Acts 10 in the famous vision of the sheet being let down from heaven.

So, the Lord probes down to the depths: “Peter do you love me?” And Peter replies, in effect, “Lord, despite what I have done, despite my betrayal, despite the boast I made and did not keep, *you know that I love you.*” And, what is most important, in each case *the Lord accepts Peter’s declaration* and gives him a commission: “feed my sheep.” And here the commission is not so much evangelism, reaching the nations – has been the focus so far in chapters 20 and 21 – but the pastorate, the care of the flock of God. There is no doubt that this entire scene is meant to restore Peter publicly to a position of leadership and trust.

- v.18 “Stretch out your hands” was a common way to refer to crucifixion in the ancient world, not unlike “strapping you in the chair” might be a reference nowadays to execution by electrocution. Peter was crucified, of course, as we know from early Christian writings.
- v.20 Drawing attention here to the “beloved disciple” serves two purposes. First, the Gospel being virtually over, this reminder of John’s intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus establishes his credentials as the author of this account of the Lord’s life and work. Second, the fact that it was Peter, remember, who had suggested to John that he ask that question as they lay on opposite sides of the Lord at the Last Supper reminds us that Peter and John were close as well. It is natural, if not justifiable, for Peter to want to know what will become of his friend. He is going to have to pay dearly for his following Christ, what about John?
- v.22 The Lord’s reply is the equivalent of “It’s none of your business.”
- v.23 We can easily imagine the mistake and the consequences of it. As John got older and older, people would think the second coming closer and closer. Here is another part of the argument that John wrote the Gospel later in the first century when he was an old man. And, of course, thinking that the second coming must come before John’s death, his dying would prove a major blow to the Christian faith. John knows that these ideas are circulating and takes pains to correct the false impression that people had taken away from the Lord’s words.

Now, to be sure, there are a number of purposes served in this fascinating text that we have before us today. John reminds his readers of his credentials to write such an account of the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He was an intimate of the Savior’s through the entire course of his public ministry and beyond. Further, he corrects a misunderstanding that must have been sufficiently widespread in the church at that time for John

to feel it important to put matters straight. And, having given a full account of Peter's betrayal, John gives a full account as well of his restoration.

All of those matters are, of course, interesting and important in their own way. But I have chosen to treat this text rather as a beautiful account of the chapters of a believing life. In this case, of course, it is Peter's life, but, in respect to what is said about Peter, it might be any Christian's life.

Perhaps you thought about this as well as we read the text. Peter, of course, had, just a few days before, made a terrible hash of things. It would have been bad enough to have betrayed the Lord, and to have betrayed him at the time when he did, when Jesus was being so cruelly mistreated by his enemies; but to have done so after making such a proud boast of his undying loyalty to Jesus was sin upon sin and shame upon shame.

It is interesting and highly important how Peter protests his love and loyalty to the Lord Jesus now, after his betrayal. Three times, in response to the Lord's questioning him, he responded, "Lord, *you know* that I love you!" No longer the proud boasting of some days before. No longer the, "Lord, even if everyone else betrays you, I never shall," words which his conscience must have found bitter as gall every time they were remembered. Now, it is the far better, and far wiser, "Lord, *you know* that I love you."

Surely, every experienced Christian can find himself or herself in *that* statement. I make it in some form or another all the time. I am always telling the Lord, "Lord, you know that I love you." Which is to say, "I know that my life does not demonstrate my love for you as it should. I rightly fear that others may look at me from time to time and gather from what they see and hear that I do *not* love the Lord Jesus with a whole heart. But, Lord, as you know my heart, as you see into its depths, as you are able to discern my true loyalties and my deepest longings and my most fundamental convictions, Lord, you *know* that I love you. You know that in my heart and with all my heart, I would never trade you or your love for me for any of the pleasures of this world. You know that if I were given the choice of Christ or everything that this world could conceivably offer me, I would take Christ in a heartbeat. You know that if you were ever to come to me and offer me the choice of a life of complete consecration to Jesus Christ, with heavy trials and sharp persecutions to match, or a more worldly life, with all the best this world could provide, with nothing but ease, comfort, pleasure, success, and fame, I would not hesitate one moment in taking that life that would be the greatest honor to Christ and I would bind those trials and persecutions around me as a crown. Lord, you *know* that I love you."

What Christian is there who has not thought that way, who has not spoken to the Lord that way, who has not comforted himself or herself that, even if we have failed, even if we have stumbled, even if we have betrayed the Lord times without number, he *knows* that we love him. This is Peter's version of what Paul said when the great Apostle to the Gentiles was bemoaning his own still great sinfulness, 30 years into his Christian life: "Lord, it is not I, it is the sin that dwells within me!" That sinning Paul, that selfish Paul, that lazy Paul, that small-minded Paul, that lustful Paul, that greedy Paul, that indifferent Paul – that is not the true Paul, and Lord, you *know* it is not the true Paul!

There, surely, is one of the chapters of our lives. The story of all our disgrace and our shame and our miserable failure to live worthy of the grace that we have received. It is a long and miserable chapter, that chapter in the story of every Christian's life. It is a chapter written in blood and in gall.

But, then, there is restoration and peace once again and a sense of the Lord's love and acceptance. It is a beautiful thing, I think, that the Lord asked his question of Peter three times. What better way was there of completely undoing what Peter had done, of wiping it off the slate, each denial matched with another confession of love *and, what is more important and wonderful,* each denial matched with an assertion on the Lord's part that Peter was not only forgiven and restored, but as well that his commission was still very much in force. The Lord was still quite prepared to have Peter as his servant and to give him important work to do.

Here too is every genuine Christian life: as many new beginnings as we have sins and as we have days. What Christian is there who has not lived his or her life daily in the strength of the promise that the mercies of the Lord are new every morning, that our sins have been buried in the deepest sea and remembered no more, and that our calling to serve the Lord has not at all been nullified by our many failures to do so? And so the story of this chapter is how each Christian goes on, by the grace of God, to serve the Lord, failures notwithstanding, service rendered, ministry performed, obedience offered.

I was talking books the other day with my new son-in-law. I never imagined that I was going to enjoy so much buying books for someone else! We were talking about J.N.D. Kelly's magisterial biography of Jerome, the great 4th century church father, translator of the Bible, and champion of causes both good and bad. Jerome was a great man and he loved the Lord. There can be no doubt about that. He provided in his life and scholarly work a great service to the church of his day and has continued to serve the church ever since through his voluminous writings. But Jerome, not to put too fine a point on it, could be a real pill! If you happened to get on his bad side – and virtually anyone who disagreed with him got on his bad side – he would not hesitate to bend his great powers to the cause of ruining your reputation. He had little good to say, for example, about the sainted Ambrose, because Ambrose had taken the opposite side in a dispute in the church at Rome of which Jerome was a principal figure. Time and again in his biography Jerome makes us cringe at the things he says and does. Far too often he hides a zeal for himself behind the mask of a zeal for the truth and the honor of Christ. And, in that, he is so much like us! Certainly, he is very much like me!

Jerome would have been hard to take during his lifetime, had we known him and had we then the views of things we have now. But, from a distance, it is so easy to say that, for all his obvious faults, he lived a great life, God used him mightily, and his virtues, which were considerable, were by no means nullified by his vices. That is what we get in Peter also and in every Christian life. Life goes on under the grace of God, despite our sins, and great things can be done for the Lord despite our past failures and present weakness. It may be that this is an even greater demonstration of God's grace than our justification, the forgiveness of our sins: that God is willing and able to make something significant out of *our* lives, something beautiful, something worthy, when there is still so much evil and pathetic that remains in us. No wonder McCheyne called sanctification, "the better half of salvation."

There is the second chapter in the story of every Christian's life: useful service being given in defiance of a record of dismal failure!

But, we go on. The book is not finished. What is remarkable to me is the implication that Peter lived the rest of his life under the shadow of this prediction the Lord had made. For thirty years or so, Peter lived his life and did his work knowing that some day soon he would be arrested and then crucified. That form of death was terrible enough when it overtook you largely suddenly and by surprise, but Peter lived with the active prospect that he would die by crucifixion for many years.

I've often told this story to my kids. Years ago, when I was a boy, my Father combined one summer some family vacation travel with preaching. He often preached in churches and, at the same time, took the opportunity to speak on behalf of Covenant Theological Seminary, of which he was the president in those days. Well, the upshot was that that summer, we heard the same sermon many times. I can't remember now anything about that sermon *except* an illustration he used. Lenin's definition of a communist: "a dead man on furlough." I'm sure the illustration had to do with the measure of commitment that communists expected of their own and, correspondingly, how much more committed a Christian ought to be to the cause of Jesus Christ. "A dead man on furlough." Well, that was Peter. He had already heard his death sentence. It was only a matter of time. He knew how he was going to die, how cruelly his life would end. The years that remained were to be given to the work to which he had been summoned: preaching to the nations and caring for the sheep of God.

Because the Lord Jesus would return and there would be a wonderful life forever after his life in this world, Peter was to devote himself unstintingly until his death to the Lord's cause. He had a fixed amount of time and needed to cram as much useful ministry into that time as he could. The day of his death drew inexorably nearer. Time was short. The work was great. Complete devotion and concentration were called for. A complete forgetfulness of self and pleasure. A dead man on furlough.

And is this not precisely how the Bible is always describing the Christian life, in these extravagant terms of utter self-forgetfulness and consecration to the cause. Dying daily, taking up one's cross to follow the Lord, hating father, mother, children, surrendering homes and fields, not even going back to bury our dead, fighting a great fight, and on and on in the NT these pictures, these images of a Christian life that is single-minded, unqualified devotion to the will of God. Surely, it remains always true that he who loses his life finds it and that in keeping the commandments of God there is a great reward – we know that, to be sure – but we cannot forget and do not want to, the extraordinary self-sacrifice and single-minded devotion to Christ's cause, that is everywhere in the Bible the characteristic of a true Christian.

Here it is beautifully illustrated in Peter, who must now live his life and fulfill his great calling from the Lord with the prospect of his own crucifixion hanging over him. That's how serious the Christian life is.

He who can part from country and from kin,

And scorn delights, and tread the thorny way,
 A heavenly crown, through toil and pain, to win –
 He who reviled can tender love repay,
 And buffeted, for bitter foes can pray –
 He who, upspringing at his Captain's call,
 Fights the good fight, and when at last the day
 Of fiery trial comes, can nobly fall –
 Such were a saint – or more – and such the holy Paul!

And such the holy Peter also, and so, in his or her own way, every believer, every true disciple of Jesus Christ.

And here too is a chapter in the life of every Christian. Life lived for the sake of a great cause, life lived at great cost, with the prospect of death squarely faced, in the sure and certain hope of life and rest beyond the grave. Here is the Lord Jesus telling Peter what he wants him to do and that and how he must die. *There* is the Christian life in a nutshell! A hundred times in the NT *there* is the Christian life in a nutshell. A dead man on furlough! A life taken up into a great cause and lived in total commitment until death.

And all three of these chapters an account of the entire life. Peter was not finished with failure. We know that from Paul's account of Peter's cowardice in Antioch. Perhaps we know it as well from the ancient tradition of the *Quo Vadis* story. But, then, Peter was not finished with the Lord's mercy to him and new beginnings and a fruitful life despite his failures. And he was surely not finished with his total consecration of himself for Christ's sake even unto his cruel death.

You know the story. The fires of persecution were being stoked in Rome and the church there was urging upon the great Apostle the importance of his leadership. They wanted him to flee that his life be spared for the sake of the greater good. He protested his willingness to suffer death for Christ's sake, but finally they prevailed upon him and he made his escape from Rome. As he was leaving the city, he encountered the Lord Jesus entering it. *Domine, Quo Vadis?* "Lord, where are you going?" Peter asked the Lord. "To Rome," he replied, "to be crucified again." Peter realized immediately his mistake.

Into the night the vision ebbed like breath;
 And Peter turned, and rushed on Rome and death.

You may remember that tradition has it that Peter asked to be crucified upside down, as unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord and Savior. Whether that story is true or no, we can be sure Peter's life ended that way: with sin and failure, with the Lord's mercy making all things new, and with fruitful service and faithful ministry and honor paid to Jesus Christ.

And what is so important and so wonderful about all of this concerning Peter, is that in all of this he is every Christian, every Christian man and every Christian woman. Listen to Archbishop William Temple.

“The example of Paul is of little use to me; I am not a hero. The example of John is of but little more use; my love is so feeble. But Peter is a source of constant encouragement, for his weakness is so manifest, yet because he was truly the friend of his Lord he became the Prince of the Apostles and glorified God by his death.”

And, then, speaking of the church’s traditions about Peter’s death, Temple goes on.

“History or legend? We do not know. If history, then fact or dream? We do not know. The story shows that the early Church thought of Peter as still shewing to the end some of the weakness of Simon, son of John; but the love of the Lord led him captive at the last.”
[*Readings*, 408-409]

Well, that will be enough for you and for me if the story of our lives might be written in the same fashion. More than enough.