

THE SUPREME TEST

John 21:15-17

Simon Peter had sinned grievously in denying his Lord, but he had shed bitter tears over his sin and had made frank and full confession of it, whereupon he had received forgiveness and had been taken back into sweet fellowship with Christ. How wonderful that the blessed Lord had dealt so tenderly and mercifully with the erring disciple and had restored him! Exactly what transpired during that private interview is not known, because the sins of God's children are matters which are settled between them and their Lord.

Christ had loved all of the disciples, but to Peter He had granted special manifestations of love. How He had borne with his waywardness! How often He had reached out to restrain and uphold the impulsive one! How patiently He had instructed him! How earnestly He had admonished and warned him! How gently He had led him! How tenderly He had prayed for him! How freely He had forgiven him!

Peter and the other disciples had left Jerusalem, a city that spoke too poignantly of their cowardice and denial, and returned to their home towns in a spirit of disappointment and frustration. What could they do except return to the old craft? Peter said, "I go a-fishing." "We will do the same," echoed the rest.

So, seven of the disciples went down to the Sea of Galilee to resume their old trade as fisherman. Of these seven, five are named--Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John. All night long they had been dragging their nets, and when the morning came they had "taken nothing." So, the seven tired men made for the shore in a mood of despondency.

As the darkness faded away before the dawn, the mists that had covered the sea began to lift. Far to the east the gray mountains of Gadara began to show themselves. To the west were the red roofs of the houses of Tiberias. The little waves of the sea were washing softly on the stones and pebbles of the beach. In the distance other boats appeared in the gray light of the morning with the other fishermen who had been plying their trade.

In the uncertain light of the early morning, they discerned the figure of a solitary man standing on the shore. They were hailed by His voice from the distance, saying, "Children, have ye any meat?" I can visualize Peter, hating to admit defeat, putting his hand to his mouth and shouting over the sea an emphatic and loud "No." Then the One on the shore called back to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship," assuring them that they would have better luck. The Stranger had seen what their tired eyes could not see, and on their obedience they found themselves embarrassed with a record haul of 153 fish. Something in the voice of the Stranger and the amazing intake of fish stirred old memories in the mind of John, the beloved disciple. Looking intently toward the shore where the Stranger was standing with the glow of a kindled fire beside Him, John was convinced that He was none other than Christ. John said, "Peter, it is the Lord." Peter inquired, "Are you sure?", at the same time looking intently toward the shore. When John answered in the affirmative, Peter leaped overboard with a splash, and swam and waded to the shore, without any misgivings about his reception. Meanwhile, the others in the ship lifted the anchor and rowed to the shore, not far behind Peter.

Near where Christ Jesus stood was a fire, and on the coals were several fish. What is more cheerful on a cool morning, after a night of toil, than a glowing fire? Christ invited the weary and hungry disciples to a delightful breakfast that He had provided and prepared for them. If anything ever sounded good to them, it was a hot breakfast of broiled fish on that cool morning. Accepting His invitation to dine, the disciples

gathered about the fire and sat down. Don't you imagine that Peter thought of the last time he had sat by a fire warming himself when his Lord came near? That was the night when he swore that he had never known Christ. When Christ had given thanks, He took the fish and the bread and served the disciples.

After breakfast was finished, Christ again turned His attention to Peter, who frequently held the center of the stage, and began to deal with him. He had been restored to fellowship, but he was in need of restoration to service also.

It is well for us to remember that on a previous occasion Peter had boasted that, regardless of what all others did, he would never forsake the Lord. He thus took the position that his love for Christ was greater than that of the other disciples. In the meantime he had disproved his great claim of love and loyalty. Therefore, Christ put the most pointed question of all to him, saying, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?" That plain, personal question must have struck Peter with peculiar force.

This solemn and searching question was asked for Peter's self-examination, and not for Christ's information. Note that it was a question about Peter's love, and that it was not related to his doings. But, why did the Lord call Simon Peter by his old name? It was because he needed to be reminded of what he was by nature and of what sovereign grace had wrought within him. By nature Peter was proud, and at times he evidenced a disposition toward a haughty spirit. Such an attitude always unfits anybody for worthwhile service. At any rate, if there is anything which is destined to break the neck of our pride and hurl us into the dust of humility, it is just to be reminded that at best we are only sinners saved by grace.

Our Lord called Peter by his old name to break the neck of his pride and to arouse gratitude in his heart. His old name reminded him of his former life, his old loves, and his previous allegiance. His new name reminded him of a new experience, a new fellowship, and new privileges. Common gratitude demanded that he give to his Saviour the unfeigned love and loyalty of his heart.

It is in the very nature of love to demand love. Love wants to know whether or not it is being loved. At its very heart there is the hunger for reciprocation. This is not a taint of selfishness, but a proof of genuineness. Scarcely anything is so hard to bear as unreciprocated love. Therefore, our Lord wanted to know whether or not Peter's heart was really attached to Him, was beating warm for Him, was yearning for Him, and was longing for a closer fellowship with Him. He wanted the warm, fervent and glowing feelings of Peter's heart for Himself.

"Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?" How personal that question was! This personal phase of the question constituted both the richness and the challenge of it. It has been suggested that this question meant, "Do you love Me more than these other disciples love Me?", or "Do you love Me more than you love these disciples -- your companions in pleasure and your partners in business?", or "Do you love Me more than you love these boats and fishing tackle?" Christ Jesus was certainly determined to make Simon Peter see that it is the first business of every Christian to love his Lord more than he loves anybody or anything in all the world. He rightfully demands the first place in the affections of His people. And one will never amount to much as a spiritual force until he puts Christ first in his life.

Christ was asking of Simon Peter a high measure of devotion, which He had a perfect right to expect. In fact, love carries everything with it. Christ seeks the surrender of the affections first, knowing that all else will follow. This question, "Lovest thou Me?", is one which ought to search all of our hearts.

After his terrible denials, and the attendant oaths, Peter could not very well stand there in the presence of the other disciples, who knew about his great sins, and claim that he really loved the Lord. Peter replied to the Saviour's question, "Lord, thou knowest all things," implying, "Thou knowest, what these standing here also know, that I did deny Thee; but Thou knowest something that they do not know, namely, that in spite of my denial I am fond of Thee." It was a candid admission that he had learned his lesson, and that henceforth he did not intend to rely upon himself, but upon the Lord.

In these verses two different words are translated "love." The first is the verb, *agapao*, which means to love deeply and devotedly. This is the kind of love that God has for us. John 3:16. It means an unselfish, God-like love. The second is the verb, *phileo*, which means to be fond of or to love as a friend.

It was as though the Lord Jesus had said, "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love Me deeply? Do you love Me with an unselfish, God-like love?" Unable to climb to that high level, Peter's response was equivalent to saying, "I am fond of you", "I have an affection for you", "I am a friend of yours", or "I love you as a friend." His answer was an admission that he did not love Christ as he should, but he could truthfully say that he had some love in his heart for Him.

Then Christ repeated His question, using the stronger word for "love", and Peter responded by using the weaker word for "love". When He asked the question the third time, He used Peter's word for "love." This probed Peter's heart to the very depths and he cried out with anguish, "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He meant that he had a genuine affection for Him.

And love is never passive, but always active and positive. It cannot be shut in or suppressed permanently. It will always break out and show itself in service. It will ever find a way to express itself in tangible service. True love is ever ready to suffer and to sacrifice. The love which Christ requires of those who bear His name is that which shows itself in good works. In proportion as we love Him we will try to please Him. How can we say we love Him unless we do the things He wants us to do?

Peter was commissioned to "feed" the lambs and the sheep which belonged to the Lord. He was to care for them as a physician attends his patients, as a sentinel guards the sleeping soldiers, as a leader guides his followers, and as a parent provides for the children.

Our blessed Saviour and Lord is eager and anxious for us to love Him and to express that love in faithful service for Him. In requiring a demonstration of our love, He says, "Feed My lambs." "Lambs" may denote either of two classes -- those who are young in years or those who are young in the faith. So, we must never think that they are too young to be fed. Neither must we put off the feeding until they get to riper years. They will soon be sheep. Their state as sheep will be determined largely by the way they are fed and treated while they are lambs. The nature of the flocks in the future will be determined by the treatment which the lambs receive now. Feeding the sheep includes the task of teaching in order that they may be strong in the faith, strong in Christian zeal, and strong in resisting evil.

It is a certainty that, if you love Christ, you will enjoy thinking about Him, talking to Him, reading about Him, hearing about Him, telling others about Him, and doing the things which will please Him.