

Do You Love Me?

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Near the end of the Gospel of John, after the Resurrection and before the Ascension, our Lord meets Simon Peter on the shore of Galilee and asks him a single question three times: 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' (John 21:15–17). The exchange is short. Few words. Three askings, three answers, and three charges — 'Feed My lambs,' 'Tend My sheep,' 'Feed My sheep.' It is the only place in the Gospels where the Lord formally restores a fallen disciple into a shepherding role, and He does it not by asking about Peter's strength or readiness but about his love. This lesson walks slowly through that conversation and lets it search us as it once searched Peter. The question it puts to every servant is the question that outlasts every method — not 'Are you qualified?' but 'Do you love Me?' And the charge that follows is not 'manage a program' but 'tend My sheep.'

The Setting by the Sea

The scene is quiet and familiar. Peter has returned to Galilee after the Resurrection, and he has returned to his old trade. 'I am going fishing,' he tells the others, and six disciples go with him (John 21:3). They fish all night and catch nothing. At dawn the Lord is on the shore, unrecognized at first. He tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. The catch is so great that they cannot haul it in, and John recognizes at once: 'It is the Lord.' Peter wraps his cloak and jumps into the sea.

Everything about this moment is pastoral. There is no temple, no crowd, no rhetoric. Just a small charcoal fire on a beach, some fish, some bread, and a handful of tired men. After they have eaten, the Lord turns to Peter.

"So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Feed My lambs.'" John 21:15, NKJV

Notice the name: 'Simon, son of Jonah.' Not 'Peter' — the Rock. The Lord reaches behind the new name, behind the title, behind the three-year discipleship, and addresses the man as he was before any of it. Peter's love is being asked at the level below every role he has ever held. This is important for the servant. The Lord's question to us is not to our position in the parish but to the person underneath.

Three Questions for Three Denials

The Fathers and the Church have long seen in the three askings a deliberate undoing of the three denials. On the night of the trial, Peter had stood by another charcoal fire — the text takes pains to mention it (John 18:18) — and had three times denied that he knew the Lord. Here, around another

charcoal fire, the Lord quietly returns each denial to Peter and asks him, one by one, to answer now with love.

This is how the Lord heals. He does not pretend the wound never happened. He returns us to the place of our failure and invites us to speak again, in love, what we once spoke in fear. Peter is not lectured. He is asked a question. Each question is a gift — another chance to say, this time, what he should have said before.

St. John Chrysostom writes on this with great tenderness:

“He asks him three times, because he had denied three times; not to reproach, but to heal the wound; for where the sin is, there also is the medicine. And He sets over him, as over a repenting physician, the whole flock; that we may know that nothing so wins the love of Christ as the care of our neighbor.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXVIII.1 (paraphrased)

The Lord's way of restoring a fallen servant is worth our long contemplation. He does not delete the failure; He transfigures it into the material of a deeper love. The very memory of the denial becomes, over time, the humility out of which Peter will shepherd the Church.

'Do You Love Me?' — The Only Qualification That Lasts

The question the Lord asks Peter is the only question that finally matters for any servant of His flock. Before every meeting, every lesson, every decision: do we love Him? All other qualifications — gifts, training, experience — are useful servants, but they are terrible masters. Love is the root; everything else is the branches.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1–2, NKJV

Paul's sentence stands beside the beach conversation. A servant may speak well, know much, and accomplish visibly, and still, without love, be nothing in the Lord's reckoning. The converse is also true: a servant who is limited in every measurable way but who truly loves the Lord will bear fruit that the measurable servants cannot produce.

The question 'do you love Me?' has a practical edge. When a servant is tired, when a class has gone poorly, when a parishioner has hurt us, when the ministry feels fruitless, the restoring question is always this one. Not 'am I gifted for this?' but 'do I love Him?' If the answer is yes — even quietly, even through tears — the next step is clear. Feed His lambs.

'Feed My Sheep' — Love That Takes a Shape

Our Lord does not leave Peter's love in the realm of sentiment. Every declaration of love is followed by a charge, and the charge is always about the flock.

“He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, 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, 'Feed My sheep.’” John 21:16–17, NKJV

Three charges: feed the lambs, tend the sheep, feed the sheep. The Lord is making explicit that love of Him is inseparable from care for His people. We cannot love the Lord in the abstract and be indifferent to the concrete human beings He has placed around us. The love He asks for always takes the shape of pastoral labor.

This runs against a temptation that lives in every generation: to keep our love of Christ as a private glow, unconnected to the ordinary work of caring for others. The Lord refuses this division. The proof of love is not a feeling we can describe but a flock that can testify we have fed them.

St. Augustine puts it plainly:

“If thou lovest Me, feed My sheep. For what is it thou dost love in Me, if not My sheep? And whoso feeds them not, denies Me, however loud his protestations of love.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, CXXIII.5 (paraphrased)

Lambs and Sheep

Our Lord does not say simply 'feed My people.' He names two groups — lambs and sheep — and the Fathers have long taken this as an instruction about the breadth of the servant's care. Lambs need feeding; sheep need tending. The young need to be fed the milk of the word (1 Peter 2:2). The mature need to be shepherded — led, protected, corrected, healed when wounded.

This division has practical weight. A servant who is good with children must remember that the adults in the parish also need feeding. A servant who teaches the adults must not forget the lambs. The servant of the elderly must not neglect the young families who are easy to overlook. The Lord's flock is various, and the servant who loves Him loves every age and condition of it.

And there is a reminder tucked inside the word 'My.' The sheep are not ours. We are not proprietors. The servant who begins to speak of 'my people' or 'my class' or 'my ministry' has forgotten something important. The flock belongs to Christ. We are allowed, for a season, to tend them on His behalf.

The Cost of Tending

After the three askings and the three charges, the Lord adds something Peter could not have anticipated:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another

will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.” John 21:18–19, NKJV

The charge to feed the sheep is immediately tied to the cross Peter will one day himself embrace. Shepherding in the Lord's kingdom is not light work. It asks of the servant a willingness to be led where he would not naturally choose, to be stretched out, to lay down his own plans. Peter will eventually die on a cross — tradition tells us, inverted at his own request — and the Lord is telling him this here, at the very moment of restoration.

The servant who reads this honestly should not be discouraged. The Lord is not cruel. He is honest. He tells Peter at the beginning of his pastoral work what shepherding will cost, so that Peter is not surprised when the cost comes. The same honesty is a gift to us. Service in His name is a form of the cross. Small crosses for some, larger for others, but in every case some laying down of the self. The servant who has come to the beach is ready for this, because he has heard the question and answered it honestly.

'Follow Me'

The whole conversation ends with two words:

“And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.’” John 21:19, NKJV

This is where it ends. After the three questions. After the three charges. After the quiet announcement of the cross. The Lord does not give Peter a plan, a program, a five-year strategy for the Church. He gives him two words: 'Follow Me.'

This is, finally, the whole of the servant's life. We follow. Our tending of His flock is downstream of our following of Him. If we stop following Him, our tending slowly becomes our own — our opinions, our agendas, our small kingdoms. If we keep following Him, our tending stays soft, humble, and His.

The rest of John 21 closes with a gentle correction. Peter, turning, sees John and asks, 'But Lord, what about this man?' The Lord replies, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me' (John 21:22). Even at the moment of restoration, Peter is tempted to look sideways and compare. The Lord's answer is the answer to every comparing servant: what is that to you? You follow Me.

May the Lord who came to the shore that morning — who lit the fire, cooked the fish, and spoke our very name — come again to every servant whose love has grown cold. May He ask us, simply, what He asked Peter. May He meet our stammering yes with the patience that expects only more love and not less. May the lambs of His pasture be fed by our hands, the sheep tended with our voice, and the old denials of our lives transfigured, one by one, into the humility out of which we finally learn to shepherd. And when the hour comes that we too are girded and carried where we would not wish to go, may we go following Him. To Him be the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. The Lord addresses Peter as 'Simon, son of Jonah' — beneath the new name and the title. What would it mean for our service if the Lord addressed the person beneath our roles rather than the role itself?
2. The three askings matched the three denials. Where in our own story has the Lord returned us to the place of a failure and given us a chance to answer again in love?
3. The only qualification that finally lasts is 'do you love Me?' In a tired or discouraging week, how does returning to that question reorder our service?
4. Every declaration of love is followed by a charge to feed the flock. Is there a point at which our love of Christ has remained private and has not yet taken the shape of pastoral work?
5. The Lord speaks of both lambs and sheep. Who in our parish — of a particular age or condition — are we most tempted to overlook, and what small step toward them could we take this week?
6. The charge to tend is immediately joined to the announcement of the cross. How does it change the texture of our service to know, from the beginning, that it will cost us?
7. The conversation ends with 'Follow Me.' When we glance sideways at another servant and ask 'But Lord, what about him?', what does the Lord's answer — 'What is that to you? You follow Me' — say to us today?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, LXXXVII–LXXXVIII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, CXXIII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 7.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book XII (on John 21).
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John.
- Fr. Thomas Hopko, Speaking the Truth in Love (on the pastor's vocation).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes