

## **Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John**

### **Part 12: Do You Love Me? John 21**

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#### **The most important question: Do you love me?**

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?" – John 21:16

##### **I. Is it just a feeling?**

No. Loving Jesus is not just a feeling.

Peter says: "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." – John 13:37

Here's the thing about feelings, though, even religious ones: they come, and they go.

Jesus knew this, and I imagine with softness and warmth in his gaze he responds to Peter: "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!" – John 13:38

Feelings, even intense *spiritual feelings*, come and go.

"Even when spiritual voices do come from God, I warn you: don't think you will be any better because of them. After all, didn't Christ talk a lot with the Pharisees? All good comes from what we do with what we hear. Unless these messages are in harmony with revealed truth, dismiss them as swiftly as you would words spoken by the spirit of evil."<sup>1</sup> - Teresa of Avila (16<sup>th</sup> C)

##### **II. Is it just what we say?**

At times Peter stands tall and says great things: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." – John 6:38

Peter *knew* who Jesus was. Peter had *said* He'd follow Jesus. And yet, before the rooster crowed, three times Peter denied Jesus.

##### **III. Is it just what we do?**

One of the most mystifying proclamations of Jesus is found in Matthew 7:22-23: Jesus says to the crowds gathered around Him:

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, pg. 174.

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' – Matthew 7:22-23

Yes of course, as we will see, Jesus' love demands action more than feeling or words. But we can live a life of pious action in the wrong direction.

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brother's Karmazov*, a wise orthodox hermit is visited by a woman who doubts that there is a life after death. The prescription of this sage is that she actively loves her neighbor, and, in time, she'll find that she'll be made certain of God's love and the immortality of the soul. Active love, love in action, dispels the doubt.

But then, of course, she goes on. Well, it's what I've always wanted to do! I'll become a nun! Give myself to the poor!

The elder goes on:

"...active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving even of one's life, provided it does not take long but is soon over, as on stage, and everyone is looking and praising. Whereas active love is labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science." - Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brother's Karmazov*

Peter, it seems, was living a dreaming kind of love. Yes, full of action, but it seems the wrong kind. He's ready to perform when it suits him, but the moment of real pressure, the moment of actual cost, perhaps when no one is watching, he'll give into the pressure. So, before the rooster crows, he denies Jesus. Three times.

#### **IV. Loving Jesus**

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15)

"He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, "Do you love me?" – Henri Nouwen

We sometimes stop using the phrase 'jealous' to describe God once we get to Jesus. Here we should correct that error. Loving Jesus is not just feeling, proclamation, or an action, because loving Jesus is all-encompassing and all-consuming.

<sup>18</sup> Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." <sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" – John 21:18-19

"...Jesus has a different vision of maturity: It is the ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go." – Henri Nouwen

What is Jesus saying then? Love cannot *just* be feeling, proclamation or an action. It's letting Jesus lead us. It's adopting His way of life as we are deeply connected to Him.

Think of it: that's a deeply intimate thing. Like, he's *with us* in that. He's leading us to develop this rich, maturity; this real love, that will be costly. Sacrificial. Self-giving for the sake of another.

Those large statements Peter made prior to Jesus' death and resurrection – promises even to "die with you" – well, Jesus tells him that he will. Tradition says that Peter himself was also crucified. He does it. In his growing love for Jesus, he begins to pastor, to care for the sheep, to announce the news that Jesus reigns, and that leads to a literal cross in his case.

## **V. God Says I Love You First**

God always says "I love you" first. Peter could only know Jesus and love Jesus in return because Jesus had already given everything of himself. The whole story of God – from Genesis through Revelation – is a story of God's great "I love you."

"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." – 1 John 4:9-10

Peter could say "I love you" because he now knew Jesus had said "I love you" first. And we can too. So, here are a few ways we might respond today:

### **1. Restoration**

**Restoration is always based on how Jesus says "I love you" first – through his death on the cross.**

Here's the beauty of this story. Even our failures and sin – because of the lavish graciousness and mercy of God because; because God says "I love you" first – even these failures become, as they were for Peter, an opportunity to say again, "You know everything, Lord. You know that I love you."

### **2. Followership**

**Notice: the scene ends with Jesus saying to Peter "Follow me."** Every Christian is a disciple. And to "follow Jesus" is what it means to be a disciple.

John 8:31: "If you hold on to my teaching, you are really my disciples."

John 12:2: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be."

John 13:34: "Everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another."

John 14:23 "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching."

John 18:37 "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

John 21:19 "Follow Me

John 21:22 "What is it to you? You follow me."

**We love Jesus by letting His love melt our hearts, and then following Him as a response.**

We don't just paint a thin veneer of "Jesus" over our otherwise self-serving projects. We say, "Yes, where you lead me, that's where I'll go." Our "I do love you," will have that shape.

### **3. No Comparison**

**We don't compare ourselves, and our discipleship journey, with any other person.**

Jesus says to Peter – who is looking over his shoulder at his fellow disciples, wondering about Jesus' plans for him, comparing – and, He says to all of us who might be tempted to do the same, wondering about Jesus' plans for them. Jesus says "...what is that to you? You must follow me." – John 21:22

Ask yourself: "What is Jesus calling me to? How do I love and honour Jesus in this unique set of circumstances?"

When tempted to compare, hear Jesus words again: "What is that to you?" And answer this rhetorical question: "It's nothing to me. My joy is to follow Jesus into the unique journey He is calling me to." And when we give ourselves to Him like that, it will be a joy.

## **Life Group Discussion and Reflection**

### **Open Up**

Love is not math. It's nearly impossible to quantify, measure, or calculate. And yet a Christian understanding is that love fundamental to our existence, for we were created out of love and for love. And we also want to know where we stand with others: "Do you love me?" is at bottom what we long to know. This story shows us that Jesus is deserving of our love – that we would love Him as first and best.

As you consider what it means to love Jesus, what are the most significant hurdles, hang-ups, or challenges that you have with it?

### **Dig In**

1. The story of Jesus restoring, and commissioning Peter in John 21 reminds us, as Lesslie Newbigin puts it, "that the flock which belongs to Jesus consists not of the righteous but

of sinners called to repentance. If Peter has primacy among the apostles, it is because he has primacy as a forgiven sinner." (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 279).

- a. How does this story of restoration and commissioning encourage you personally?
  - b. How might it change how you see others, even those who have sinned in fairly obvious ways?
2. We looked at the idea that even Peter's deep failure and denial of Jesus became, by grace, an opportunity for Peter to say "I love you" to Jesus. Though, as Paul argues in Romans 6, God's grace is never meant to be seen as a license to carry on in sin:
- a. How does it make you feel to consider that God can even use our failures as a place to deepen our connection with Him?
  - b. What might hold you back from running to Jesus for restoration?
  - c. How might this story help you overcome those hurdles?
3. Directly after Jesus commissions Peter and lets Him know that love for Jesus will be costly, Peter begins to compare his journey to that of the Beloved Disciple.
- a. How does Jesus respond to Peter?
  - b. How have you felt that same pull toward comparison?
  - c. What would it look like to let go of that? What might help you to accept your specific journey of followership?

### **Pray**

Take time to simply give thanks to Jesus – that He always says "I love you" first. Bring those things that were discussed to Jesus as you pray for each other. Take time to pray that we would be a community deeply committed to sacrificial love for our broader community.

