

## DO YOU LOVE JESUS?

John 21:15-25

By Raymond White

On the surface this text seems to be a confident affirmation of Peter's love for Jesus. Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And Peter asserts three times, "Yes, of course. You know I do."

But that English translation is entirely wrong, and the Greek gives exactly the opposite message. This dialog is not a message of Peter's self confidence and devotion, but is rather a message of his lost confidence and self doubt, and restoration.

To understand this text, you need to understand the two Greek words for love: agape (ἀγαπή) and pheleo (φιλῶ). Agape is divine love and is unconditional. Pheleo is more like a strong affection and is very conditional. To bring the truth of this text to the surface, I'll translate agape to love and pheleo to like. That will expose what this text is really saying.

Now picture Peter. Having so often boasted of his love for Jesus, (*Matthew 25:33, John 13:37*), he now stares into the face of his own failure. He denied Jesus three times. His denial is recorded in all four gospels so there is no doubt what happened.

Now Jesus asks him, "Do you love me?" If you were in Peter's situation, how would you answer? Here's what really happened, how the dialog unfolded.

*John 21:15* Simon [Jesus no longer calls him Peter, the rock], *lovest* [agapas] *thou me?*  
*Yea Lord: thou knowest that I love* [phelo] *thee.*

The key to understanding this text is to notice that Peter changed the word from agapas to phelo. In other words, Peter is hiding, he is evading Jesus' direct question.

Jesus asks, "Simon, do you love me?"

Peter answers, "Well, Lord, you know I like you a lot." In other words, I hope that will do because that's all I've got.

*John 21:16* ...Simon ... *lovest* [agapas] *thou me?* *He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love* [phelo] *thee.*

So Jesus persists, and Peter persists.

"But Peter, that's not what I asked. Do you *love* me?"

"Well, you know that I *like* you a lot." Honestly, what else is Peter to say? How can he affirm that he loves Jesus when he had just denied him three times? That's the issue here.

So now what does Jesus do? He comes right down to Peter's level.

*John 21:17* ...Simon ... *lovest* [pheleis] *thou me?* *Peter was grieved, because he said unto him the third time, Lovest* [pheleis] *thou me?* *And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love* [pheleis] *thee.*

Jesus is saying, "Okay Peter, I can play that game too. If 'like' is all you got, do you even 'like' me?"

Then the text says, “Peter was grieved.” What grieved Peter? That Jesus asked him three times? No. But that the third time, Jesus asked, “well, do you even like me?” That’s what upset Peter. Jesus challenged even Peter’s “like.”

So, what did Peter do about that? Suddenly he is challenged. He thought he was on safe ground, “at least I like you,” but now Jesus questioned even that, “do you even like me?”

So Peter came up with something different. If he was unsure that he loved or even liked Jesus, he had one security left: he turned it back on Jesus. “Lord, I don’t know. I don’t know my own heart. But *you* know my heart because you know everything. *You* know that I like you even when I’m not so sure.”

Now, that’s a defense that makes sense. What’s more important than you knowing that you love God? God knowing that you love God. Life has its ups and down, twists and turns. Sometimes you’re sure you love God, other times you’re not sure at all. But one thing is always sure: God knows that you love him, and that’s far more reliable.

But Jesus was not done with Peter yet. Peter said, “But *you* know.”

So Jesus responded to that, “Yes indeed, I do know. And here’s what I know about you, Peter.” And Jesus proceeded to tell Peter what was really in Peter’s heart.

*John 21:18* Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not. :19 This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.”

Here’s what it means: “Yes Peter, I know that you love me. And I know that you denied me, but you never will deny me again. The next time your life is on the line for me, you will die for me, on a cross. Peter, you’re back on the team. Now, follow me.”

That was the best news Peter ever heard. He had denied the Lord once, he never would again. He knew finally that he loved Jesus, enough to die for him. And he knew that Jesus knew it. Now we might understand a little better why Peter later wrote:

*1 Peter 4:13* Rejoice inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that when his glory shall be revealed ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

## EPILOG

The story is not quite done yet.

As Jesus and Peter were walking together along the beach, Peter glanced back and noticed John tagging along.

*John 21:20* Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? :21 Peter seeing him, saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

Peter's question was a natural one. "Lord, you just told me that when I'm old I'll be crucified, and that's fine, I have no problem with that. But tell me. What about John? What will happen to him?"

*John 21:22 Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.*

Jesus' answer to that question was basically, "Why should you care? Peter, don't meddle in other peoples affairs. How I deal with John is how I deal with John. That's none of your business. What *is* your business is how I deal with you. *You* follow me. Get it?"

Peter got it.

However he was not silent about that conversation and that started a buzz.

*John 21:23 Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?:24 This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true. :25 And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.*

It was okay that it started a buzz. The buzz probably began with Peter and John discussing what Jesus might have meant and others overhearing their conversation. Did Jesus mean that literally? That he might keep John alive until Jesus returned? Could be. Of course he didn't say that, but they were sure now that he certainly could do that if he chose to. The buzz was, "But that's not what he said." "Yeah, but maybe that's what he meant." And so the banter probably went.

Perhaps that was exactly what Jesus intended to do. John does point out, "I am the author, and I was the subject of that conversation so I ought to know what he meant. After all, I'm still here, aren't I? And I'm telling you that Jesus did so many miracles that I couldn't possibly document them all." As if to say, "Keeping me alive until he returns would be a small thing for him to do."

So, maybe. Maybe the young man John, soon the old man John writing his gospel after everyone else was dead, is older still today, walking among us, waiting for Jesus to return. I'm not saying he is, I'm just saying — maybe.