

john 21 v 15 - 25

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[0 : 00] If you have John 21 open in your Bibles, that will be a help as we consider this meeting of Jesus and the Apostle Peter.

Just as you're turning there, I'm going to read briefly the first opening verses from 1 Corinthians 13. Now I will show you the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, I can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love, I gain nothing. Probably the greatest theme of any musical song, whether it be a pop song, rock song, whether it be going back to the days of jazz or whatever it may be, the greatest theme, the central thought on nearly all of those songs is the subject of love.

Love between a man and a woman. But to be honest, the large number of those songs really are full of untruthful promises of love.

[1 : 19] Fickle love, frail love. Often the description of love that's given in those songs is a poor reflection on love. It's a disjointed and a twisted view of love.

However, the American rock singer Meatloaf sang these words in one of his songs. I won't sing it, I'll just say it, okay. It's been going through my head all morning, I've been trying not to sing it.

I want you, I need you, but there ain't no way I'm ever going to love you, but don't be sad, because two out of three ain't bad.

It's hardly romantic, but in one sense it's refreshingly honest. But of course love is the essential ingredient in every and any relationship.

We need love. We want someone to love us. It's not enough for someone to need us or us to want someone. That isn't love.

[2 : 17] That's actually love for self. If I want and need, it's the height of selfishness if I don't also love. Now, in our relationship, which is what the very heart of the Christian life is, it's a relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and a person, a Christian.

Does our relationship bear any resemblance to that kind of love that Meatloaf sang about? Do we need Jesus? Yes, we do, because we are sinners and need his forgiveness.

Do we want Jesus? Yes, we do, because he's the only one who can get us into heaven. But do we love Jesus Christ? That is the question. As Jesus and Peter, as we have them here in John 21, walking, well, you imagine they're walking along the beach.

They may have just been set around the breakfast fire after the breakfast with the other disciples. But we see that this is really the first time that Peter and Jesus have spoken since Jesus' arrest on that night before his crucifixion.

And, of course, in that evening, Peter denied the Lord Jesus three times. Denied knowing him to the people who he was stood with. In fact, in the end, calling down curses upon himself, saying that I do not, I have never known, and have nothing to do with this Jesus.

[3 : 43] And no doubt, Peter, especially after Jesus was raised again, and he had seen Jesus, I'm sure that in Peter's mind, he'd been going over this conversation with Jesus.

What would Jesus say to him when he saw him after that night of betrayal, of cowardice? Would he say, Peter, why did you deny me? I feel so let down by you, Peter.

Would he say to Peter, well, I can never trust you again. But, in fact, the thing that Jesus says, first of all, to him is truly surprising.

Simon, son of John, do you truly love me? It's the first thing he asks. It's the only thing he asks. Do you love me? Now, we've been looking, haven't we, over Easter and the weeks after, how Jesus meets with individuals and with groups.

He met with Mary. We didn't look at that too much, but on Easter Sunday morning, we saw that was Mary grieving and sorrowing, and Jesus met with her, and his presence with her was to comfort and to give hope.

[4 : 50] We saw how Jesus came particularly to minister to Thomas with his doubts and his lack of faith, and how Jesus, again, ministered particularly to him so that, ultimately, Peter was able to say, my Lord and my God.

His faith was certain and solid in the very character and the person of Jesus Christ. We see here again, Jesus meets with Peter in his guilt, in his shame, and meets with him in such a way as to deal with that guilt and shame.

Whatever we are, whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, whoever we are, wherever we've come from, whatever our history, whatever our struggles. You know, I know it's a simplistic way of looking at things, but it's the truth.

Jesus Christ's presence is the answer. He is the answer. He is the one who alone can deal and meet with us where we are. But here's the question. Do I love him?

Peter, do you love me? It's a simple question, isn't it really? It's only just a couple of words, but it's the most searching question. It's the most penetrating question.

[6 : 01] It gets to the very heart of every single person. You see, we can outwardly give the appearance of being a Christian, can't we? We can go through the motions of being a Christian.

We can go to church, and we can read our Bibles, and we can even pray, and we can care for other people. Well, all those things are good, but without love, all of those things are useless.

That's what we read there from 1 Corinthians 13. If I speak with the tongues of angels, if I give my money away, if I have great faith, if I can do all these things but haven't loved, I am nothing, and I profit nothing.

Love is the vital ingredient. Ultimately, without love for Christ, we are not saved. Without love for Christ, we are not a Christian. Without love for Christ, we are still in our sins.

Without love for Christ, we are still lost and hopeless and hell-bound. That's how important it is. Love is the vital ingredient, and it always has been.

[7 : 03] It's not just a new thing that Jesus sort of introduces. It's something that goes all the way through the Bible. Love for God has always been the key commandment to be fulfilled.

Back in Deuteronomy chapter 6, which Jesus himself quotes when he's asked, what's the greatest commandment? It's this. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.

It's never been anything else. It's never been simply doing things that have made you work with God. It's always been love. Love has only been the only pass mark, the only standard that counts in the end.

Now, Jesus, as he speaks with Peter, doesn't ask, Simon, son of John, do you truly love me? Because Jesus needs to be reassured of Peter's love, that somehow Jesus was upset by his rejection and needs reassuring.

No, that's not the reason he asks him. He isn't asking him because he's not sure that Peter does love him at all and he needs him to say it. No, he's not that.

[8 : 07] Rather, the reason that he asks Peter is because he wants Peter to be sure that he loves Christ and because of his love for Christ, he is forgiven. And he is accepted and he's reinstated and he's received.

That's what he's doing. And though Peter's love is a faltering love and a feeble love like ours, yet Jesus is saying to him, I'm accepting you on the basis of that love.

Because I know it's genuine. I know it's real. So the question we need to ask is this. If we want to be assured that we are forgiven, if we want to be certain that we are a Christian, if we want to be certain that we are those who are following and loving him, the question is, do I love him?

Do I love him? But what is love? That's a great question, isn't it? What is love? What is love for Christ like? How do we know what love for Christ means? We're surrounded, aren't we, as I said, in culture and in the media with love everywhere.

But it's just puerile, isn't it? It's watered down. It's twisted. It's distorted. How do we know what real love looks like? It's very hard, isn't it, to find real, true love in the world in which we live.

[9 : 23] And what is this real love like that we are to have for Christ? Well, then, we find it here in this conversation between Jesus and Peter.

And the first thing that we realize, the first thing that we see about true love for Christ, real love for Christ is this. It is a total love. It is a total love.

Well, Simon, son of Peter, do you love me more than these? Clearly meaning the other disciples, those men he'd spent those three years with, his closest friends.

See, Christ demands, in fact, more than that, Christ deserves and will settle for nothing less than our best love, our first love.

Sometimes that can be hard for somebody who's married to a Christian who's not a Christian themselves. They can say, well, hold on, you married to me and you love me, but you're saying you love Christ more than me?

[10 : 18] Yes, that can be really hard, can't it? But it's a different type of love than a love between a husband and wife. But it's a real love and it's a first love and it's a primary love.

See, a Christian can be somebody who's hardworking. They can be somebody who's doctrinally got everything figured out about what the Bible teaches. They can be somebody who's very kind. They can be somebody who avoids sin whenever possible and seeks to live a holy life.

But without love for Christ, that is not real love. That is not being a Christian. Later on in the Bible, in the book of Revelation, Jesus, as he has risen from the dead, sends messages, letters, to several churches.

And the very first church he writes a letter to is a church in Ephesus. And the very first thing he has to say to them, this church, is this. I know your deeds, your hard work, your perseverance.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men. That you've tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and found them false. You've persevered, have endured hardships for my name, and you've not grown weary.

[11 : 29] Yet, I have this against you. You've forsaken your first love. Forsaken your first love. Any love that does not put Jesus Christ first is not worthy of him.

It's not what he deserves. What is his right? Sometimes it's hard, isn't it, for us to grasp that. Because when we think about love and our loving relationship with somebody, we often judge love by action, don't we?

We say, well, of course, you've got to show it. Say it with flowers, or say it with chocolates, or say it with cards. You've got to show love. That's true. But what we've got to realize here, that Christ's primary desire for us is not what we do.

Christ's primary concern is not about our works, our good deeds, our religiosity. Those aren't the things that he truly looks for and longs for. First of all, he longs for and looks for the hearts that loves him.

David, we're told, became king because God said, this is a man after my own heart. It's your heart, dear friends, a heart that loves Christ firstly above all.

[12 : 50] It's mine. It's only from that heart of love that the Christian life can flow. It can't go the other way. We cannot love Christ by the things that we do.

We cannot, as it were, do things for him and then love him. It's as we love him and then the life follows. So it's total love. It's primary love. It's first love. Do you love me more than these?

Do I come number one? We see by Peter's response to that first question and to the others as well that true love for Jesus is actually a humble love. Lord, you know that I love you.

You know that I love you. See, true love is not a boasting love. It's not a proud love. It's not an arrogant love. It's not a self-congratulating love. From that passage in 1 Corinthians 13, it goes on to say, Love does not envy.

It is not boastful. It is not proud. See, the old Peter, if you read the Gospels, and of course I'd encourage you to read them, you find that this older Peter, before the cross, before he denies Jesus, was somebody who liked to boast.

[13 : 58] He liked to say, you know, he liked to think of himself as rather clever, rather good. He made all sorts of boasts, even on that night before Jesus' death. Jesus had warned the disciples and said, all of you will fall away on account of me.

Peter replied, even if all fall away, even if everybody else falls away on account of you, I never will. Tell you the truth, Jesus answered, this very night before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.

Peter declared, even if I have to die with you, I'll never disown you. And there he is, just a matter of a few moments later, denying the Lord. This old Peter was a boastful Peter.

I love you more than everybody else. I'm for you, I'll die for you. You see, he failed, didn't he? He denied Jesus, and that had humbled him.

That had softened him. He hadn't been as brave as he thought he could be. See, love for Christ cannot be true love if there's a sense of pride about it. If there's a sense of, I love Jesus, you know.

[15 : 02] That's a good slap on the back for me. There's no pride in the Christian. There's humility in the Christian. There's humility in the Christian, of course, because they realize that their love for Christ only flows from the fact that he first loved them.

John, as he writes later on in the Bible, in his letters to the Christian churches, he writes very much about this truth. He says in his first letter in chapter 4, He goes on a bit later on, He says, God is the initiator of any love.

He's the initiator of any love. The reason that anybody is able to love, even in the very human sense, is because we are made in the image of God. And the reason that we are able to love God, as Christians, is because God has poured out his love into our hearts.

He first loved us. And as we read the Bible, we realize again and again that the love of God for us in Christ is an incredible love. It's a love that loved us before the world was made. Amazingly.

Before we were born. A love that determined before the world was made, to send Jesus into this world to rescue us from our sin. A love that drew Jesus from heaven to earth.

[16 : 29] From that splendor and glory that was his from all eternity. That drew him to come and enter into our human world and take in our humanity. That was love for us. And we realize that it was that love for us that took him to the cross.

That took him to suffer and to die for our sins. And take the punishment that we deserve. It was purely, solely, wonderfully love. We know it's his love that has indeed come to us in our sin and our rebellion.

And by his spirit has met with us and dealt with us and brought us that place of forgiveness and faith in him. It's all God's doing, you see. The Christian knows that.

The Christian is not somebody who's able to take any pride in anything that they do or anything even that they feel. It's because he loves. I can't help but love him back. Because he loved me and I realize that love and I'm so aware of that love.

That my heart cannot help but love him. So it's a humble love. It's a total love. A humble love. We see also in the words that Jesus gives to Peter, the instructions that he gives.

[17 : 37] That it is also an obedient love. An obedient love. Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, verse 15, feed my lambs.

And in the other occasions as well, he speaks about take care of or shepherd my sheep. He's giving him instructions. He's giving him commandments. And that says, Jesus had said earlier on, just on that night, again before his death, he had been teaching the disciples.

Peter was there and he said to them, if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. You see, we can't say we love Jesus and then do exactly what we want.

We can't say we love Jesus and do those things which goes against what pleases him. That's love, isn't it? Can't say I love Jesus but refuse what he asks.

That's not love. That's a selfish love. That's a pretense of love. It's a love that only loves when it pleases me. But ultimately, the greatest expression of love, the greatest, in one sense, way of describing love is to prefer someone else above myself.

[18 : 47] That's love. Preferring someone to myself. No marriage can ever work unless there's that type of love being involved where there is the giving and the taking, is there?

No relationship with Christ can be that love which simply says, I'll follow you on my terms. I'll be a Christian as it suits me. I'll love you only when it's good for me or on my behalf.

That's a hypocritical love. A self-serving love. A false love. You know, love that prefers others. Love that the Christian has for Christ is a reflection of the love of Christ as we've been seeing.

What does his love do? Did he think of himself when he was being flogged and when his crown of thorns was placed on his head? Was he thinking of himself when he was willing and stretched out his arms to die upon the cross?

Was it not love for us? Was it not preferment for us? Putting us before himself. And how can our love for him be a love which pleases self?

[19 : 45] At least when somebody says, I hate Christ, they're honest about it. To say, I love Christ, but only when it's on my terms is just mere falsehood.

But hold on, you may say, I hope you are, or thinking. You said a little while ago that it isn't what we do that loves Christ. It's not what we do that he accepts.

It's how we love him that you accept. No, you're saying we've got to be obedient to him. We've got to do the things that he says to love him. Isn't that the opposite? No, it's not the opposite. Jesus doesn't say, show me your love by obeying me.

He simply says, if you love me, you will obey me. The obedience that comes from our hearts and our lives, the things that we do as Christians are done not under duress, not because we're afraid of God's hand falling upon us in wrath, not because we are under law and therefore we must do these things because we'll get caught out and punished.

We do these things. We live the Christian life because we love Christ, because we love to please him, because we know that his way is best for us, and we want to do the things that love him.

[20 : 59] See, it's a natural product. But this is how you can tell if you truly love Christ. This is how you can tell if you're a Christian, because in your heart there's that desire that says, I really want to please him because I love him.

Now, there are times, he says very carefully, in my marriage, when I do things for my wife because I think I should, not because I truly love to do those things.

But often there are things, often, lots of times, I do things because I love her and I want to please her. You know what I'm talking about.

But love for Christ, again, is a love which does what pleases him. It flows naturally. It's like a tree that produces fruit. It produces that fruit because, well, it's meant to.

And the Christian has been changed and transformed in such a way that the love that they have in their hearts says, I want to please him. I want to do the things that he wants me to do. Now, that isn't all the time. We struggle with that and we aren't perfect because we're still sinners.

[22 : 02] But that's the bottom line. Again, John, as he writes later on, that letter that we thought about just a moment ago, he makes this glaringly obvious that when we love Christ, we will love the people that he loves.

And we will show that we love him by loving one another. That was his command. His new commandment that he gave to his disciples, wasn't it? Love one another as I have loved you.

That's how we can express and show our love for Christ is not only by our worship and our praise and our serving of him, but us serving one another. John says this, everyone who believes, sorry, if anyone says I love God but hates his brother is a liar.

For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And he's given us this command, whoever loves God must also love his brother.

So the love for the saints, the love for one another that we have in the church, that is something of an expression, the reality of our love for Christ. Obedient love.

[23 : 13] Lord Jesus, what do you want me to do? What is your will for my life? One other thing here. We see that the love that we are to have for Christ is a penitent love, if I can put it that way.

It's a love which repents of sin, that turns away from sin. We see that because the third time that Jesus speaks to Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Verse 17, Peter, we're told, was hurt. Was hurt. And that's the New International Translation. That gives a sense of sort of being offended by what Jesus said.

That's not the sense of the word. The sense of the word is grieved. He was grieved. He was sorrowful because Jesus said that. Why was he sorrowful?

Because it reminded him because for three times he denied Jesus. And now Jesus asked him three times, do you love me? It brings strikingly back to him his own failure and his own sin.

[24 : 13] And so Peter is grieved by that. We're told in Matthew's account that after the cockerel had crowed three times when Peter had denied Jesus, that Peter wept bitterly.

He broke his heart. He realized what he'd done. He realized what an awful thing he had done to Jesus who had loved him and cared for him. And the reality is this. If we love the Lord Jesus Christ then we will hate sin.

If we love the Lord Jesus Christ then we will grieve against sin. Not just the sin of others. And we see that on the news and we see what's going on around about us and we shake our heads and say that's an awful, terrible thing to do.

The Christian somebody says when I look at my heart and my life and the way that I've lived before the Lord Jesus Christ I'm grieved by that. That's terrible. That's not right.

Because the reality is how can we love sin? How can we accept sin as Christians if we love Christ when our sin took him to the cross? Your sin and mine was what nailed him there.

[25 : 15] It was your sin and mine that drove him there. How can we love sin? That meant that the one that we love so much had to pay such an awful price.

We can't love him, can we? And say, yeah, but the sin's all right. One final thing as we close together. And it's this, that if we love the Lord Jesus Christ then we will trust him.

It's a trusting love. It's interesting, isn't it? It works. You can say, strange that as the end of this conversation closes Jesus begins to talk about the death of Peter.

Verse 18, I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself, went where you wanted. But when you're old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you, lead you where you do not want to go.

And then he says to Peter, follow me. Follow me. See, love for Christ demands faith, doesn't it?

[26 : 18] Demands trust. Well, love does. I mean, you know, if somebody loves you or says they love you then you're called upon to exercise faith. To believe them and to trust them that what they say they mean.

In fact, to accept that someone loves us is a huge leap of faith, isn't it? We're putting all of our faith in them. To be married particularly is a great step of faith.

Perhaps that's why many people are afraid of that and reject that. Because the sad truth is that when you say I love you and they love you then you're opening yourself up to have your love taken advantage of.

Opening up to be abused in that sense. Many people find it hard to accept that they're loved. Afraid of being loved. Perhaps because they've experienced this false love.

This insidious words of love but not something genuine. But the love of Christ is so genuine and real proven by the very actions of his life and by the continuing actions of his grace to us that we must and can trust him.

[27 : 25] So when Peter is called by Jesus to follow him and to trust him that even with his life and his death he is saying to Peter is your love real that you will trust me?

Tradition says that Peter was crucified as an older man probably upside down. But here he is and Jesus says do you love me?

Follow me. He's concerned isn't he? He speaks about John the other one. He says what about him? What's going to happen to John? And Jesus says never mind about him. You just follow me. We can find ourselves again so often looking around saying oh well I'd be a Christian if it wasn't for that person you know because they're a Christian and well you know they don't seem to be following you and we can get all disconnected as it were and sidetracked about other people and their walk with God and our concern is our walk with God your walk with God your relationship with Jesus.

Other people will fail us other people will let us down other people will get it wrong as we will get it wrong. But do you trust Jesus and do you follow Jesus? Do you love him to that extent?

So there's the question there's the question that's laid before me and before you this morning do I love Jesus? Do I love him first of all even above others?

[28 : 49] Do I love him humbly because I know that he loved me and gave himself for me? Do I love him obediently not only with all my heart but with all my soul and strength and mind?

Do I want to do what he wants me to do? Do I make it my priority to obey him? Do I love him penitently with a realization that my sin took him to the cross and I will do all that I can to avoid that sin?

I don't want to live that way anymore. And finally will I love him with faith trustingly leaning upon his love and his grace knowing that he is the one who I can follow and will follow.

See if I ask that question of myself dear friends before you this morning I have to say that my answer to those questions is no. I do not love Jesus in that way.

I long that I did I long that I would but I don't love him that way. But that's a good place to start I believe because we're going to sing a hymn and the very last line of that hymn says oh for grace to love you more.

[30 : 04] Love is initiated by God and we need his help to love Christ. So let's sing together our final hymn it's number 698 in our hymn book 698 Hark my soul it is the Lord number 698 O Lord our God we thank you again for the greatness and the wonder and the marvel of your love to us in the Lord Jesus Christ love which has no measure love which has no end love which is boundless love oh Lord which is powerful love oh Lord that has constrained and transformed those oh Lord that you have saved and we pray again that you would give to us ever greater love for yourself may our love be like yours

Lord deliver us from that weak effectual pathetic love Lord that so often we feel give us love that is strong and mighty love that follows and obeys love oh Lord that lives love oh Lord that trusts make us men and women of love we pray that that love may transform not only us but our community our lives our society and those we meet with Lord give us grace to love you more amen amen amen you you oh you