

LOVEST THOU ME?

UNDERSTANDING THE TWO WORDS

FOR LOVE IN JOHN 21



LOVEST THOU ME?

Understanding the Two Words for Love in John 21

“He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?”
—John 21:17

Many Christians have heard this familiar statement:

“Agapē means unconditional love.”

The statement has been repeated so often that many believers accept it as the complete definition of the Greek word. Then, when they read John 21, they are told that Jesus asked Peter whether he possessed the highest, divine, unconditional love, but Peter answered with a different Greek word because he could claim only a lower kind of friendship or affection.

That explanation is memorable, and it may contain a tender thought. However, is that what the Greek words themselves mean? Does agapē always mean unconditional, divine love? Does phileō always describe a weaker or inferior love? Was Peter admitting that he did not love Jesus with the highest kind of love?

These questions are important because how we define a Bible word affects how we understand the passage. A definition may sound meaningful and still be incomplete. We must compare Scripture with Scripture and allow the Bible’s own use of a word to guide our understanding.

The word agapē does not automatically mean unconditional love. We know this because the same Greek word family is used when Jesus said that men “loved darkness rather than light” in John 3:19. It is also used when Paul wrote that Demas “loved this present world” in 2 Timothy 4:10. Their love was certainly not divine, holy, or unconditional.

The Greek word itself does not determine the moral character of the love. We must consider who is loving, what is being loved, and how the word is being used in its context.

Yet God's love may rightly be described as unconditional: not because the word *agapē* always means unconditional, but because God did not find any condition in us that made us worthy of His love.

The Bible says:

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

—Romans 5:8

God did not begin to love us because we were righteous, obedient, worthy, or deserving. His love originated in who He is, not in who we were. He did not wait for us to love Him before He loved us. His love came first.

However, God's unconditional love should never be confused with unconditional approval. God loves sinners, but He does not approve of sin. His love does not remove the need for repentance and faith. His love provided the Savior, but God does not force anyone to receive His Son.

Our love for God is different in its direction. The Bible says:

“We love him, because he first loved us.”

—1 John 4:19

Our love is responsive. We love Jesus because He first loved us. We love Him because He gave Himself for us. We love Him because Calvary revealed the greatness of His love and opened the way for our sins to be forgiven.

Our love has a cause: He first loved us.

Our love has an object: We love Him.

Our love has an expression: We keep His words.

Jesus said:

“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”
—John 14:15

Obedience does not earn His love. Obedience gives evidence of ours.

With that distinction clearly understood, we are prepared to consider one of the most personal questions Jesus ever asked:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?”

Jesus did not ask Peter whether he was educated, talented, courageous, or capable of becoming a great leader. He did not ask whether Peter understood every truth or whether he would ever fail again.

Jesus asked about Peter’s heart:

“Lovest thou Me?”

TWO WORDS TRANSLATED LOVE

In John 21:15–17, two Greek words are translated by the English word love. The first is *agapaō*, the verb related to the noun *agapē*. This word often describes love that is committed, purposeful, self-giving, and devoted to the good of another.

The second word is *phileō*. It often expresses affection, fondness, friendship, closeness, or a warm personal attachment. Our English word Philadelphia, meaning “brotherly love,” comes from this Greek word family.

These descriptions can help us understand the different shades of meaning that the words may carry. However, they should not be treated as absolute definitions that apply the same way in every verse. The meanings of *agapaō* and *phileō* sometimes overlap. The context must help determine what the writer intended.

The conversation between Jesus and Peter develops this way.

Jesus first asked:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?”
—John 21:15

Jesus used *agapaō*. Peter answered:

“Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.”

Peter used *phileō*.

Jesus asked a second time:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?”
—John 21:16

Jesus again used *agapaō*, and Peter again answered with *phileō*.

The third time Jesus asked:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?”
—John 21:17

This time Jesus used *phileō*, the same word Peter had used in all three of his answers.

Why did Jesus change words? Some have concluded that Jesus came down to Peter’s level. They understand Jesus to be saying, “Peter, if you cannot claim the highest kind of love, can you at least say that you have affection for Me?” That interpretation is possible, and it presents a tender picture of Jesus meeting Peter in his humility and brokenness. However, the Greek words alone do not require that interpretation.

THE FATHER LOVED THE SON WITH BOTH WORDS

Perhaps the clearest evidence that *phileō* is not merely a lower or inferior kind of love is found in two statements about the Father’s love for His Son.

John 3:35 says:

“The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.”

The word translated “loveth” is *agapaō*.

Then John 5:20 says:

“For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth...”

In this verse, the word translated “loveth” is *phileō*.

John used both words to describe the Father’s love for Jesus. Surely the Father’s *phileō* love for His Son is not weaker, lower, incomplete, or merely

human. The love between the Father and the Son is perfect and eternal.

These two verses warn us against saying that agapaō always means the highest divine love while phileō always means a lesser human love. The words may emphasize different aspects of love, but they can also overlap. John was able to use both words when speaking of the Father’s perfect love for the Son.

This does not mean the change of words in John 21 has no significance. It simply means that we should not build an interpretation upon a distinction that the words themselves do not always maintain.

PETER HAD ONCE CLAIMED MORE

To understand Jesus’ question, we must remember what Peter had said before the crucifixion.

Jesus told His disciples:

“All ye shall be offended because of me this night...”

—Matthew 26:31

Peter answered:

“Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.”

—Matthew 26:33

Peter compared his faithfulness with that of the other disciples. He believed that even if everyone else failed Jesus, he would remain faithful. Later he said:

“Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.”

—Matthew 26:35

Peter sincerely believed what he was saying, but he did not yet understand the weakness of his own flesh. Before the night was over, Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus.

Now, beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asked:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?”

The words “more than these” may have brought Peter back to his earlier claim. Peter had once said that even if all the others failed, he would not. But Peter no longer answered by comparing himself with anyone else.

He did not say, “Yes, Lord, I love You more than John loves You.” He did not say, “You can depend upon me because I will never fail again.” Instead, Peter answered:

“Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.”

Peter appealed to the knowledge of Jesus rather than to his own confidence. His failure had humbled him. He no longer boasted about the greatness of his devotion. He placed the truth of his love entirely in the hands of the One who knew his heart.

THREE DENIALS AND THREE QUESTIONS

Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus asked Peter three times, “Lovest thou Me?”

The connection is difficult to miss. Peter’s three denials had been public. Other disciples knew what Peter had done. Therefore, Jesus restored Peter in the presence of the other disciples and gave him three opportunities to confess his love.

This was not a cruel punishment. Jesus was not trying to destroy Peter with guilt. He was restoring a fallen disciple and preparing him for future service.

After Peter's first answer, Jesus said:

“Feed my lambs.”

After Peter's second answer, Jesus said:

“Feed my sheep.”

After Peter's third answer, Jesus again said:

“Feed my sheep.”

Peter's failure did not end his usefulness. Jesus knew Peter's heart, forgave his failure, restored him, and entrusted His sheep to his care.

Peter was grieved when Jesus asked the third time:

“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?”

Some believe Peter was grieved because Jesus changed from *agapaō* to *phileō*. That may have contributed to the emotion of the moment. However, the text specifically says that Peter was grieved “because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?” The threefold question itself reminded Peter of his threefold denial.

Peter answered:

“Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”

What a different Peter we now see. Before the cross, Peter spoke confidently about what he would do. After his failure, he rested upon what Jesus knew.

Peter's love was not perfect, but it was real. His actions had failed to demonstrate his love, but Jesus knew what was in his heart.

WHY DID JESUS USE PETER'S WORD?

When Jesus asked the third question, He used *phileō*, the word Peter had used in every answer. Perhaps there is special tenderness in that change. Jesus may have been meeting Peter in his humbled condition and accepting the sincere expression Peter was willing to make.

However, we should not conclude that Peter possessed only a lower kind of love. The Father loved the Son with *phileō* love in John 5:20. Therefore, *phileō* cannot be dismissed as weak, inferior, or merely human.

John also varied other Greek words throughout this passage. Different words are used for feeding and shepherding, and different words are used for lambs and sheep. John sometimes varied his vocabulary without necessarily creating a separate doctrine from every change of word.

We may recognize a shade of meaning without claiming more than Scripture reveals. Jesus may have gently adopted Peter's word, but the central message is not that Peter had only a lesser love. The central message is that Jesus knew Peter's heart, restored him after his failure, and called him to demonstrate his love through faithful service.

LOVE MUST BECOME OBEDIENCE

Each time Peter said, "Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee," Jesus gave him a responsibility.

"Feed my lambs."

"Feed my sheep."

"Feed my sheep."

Jesus did not allow Peter's love to remain merely an emotion or a spoken confession. Peter's love for Christ was to be expressed through caring for those who belonged to Christ.

This agrees with what Jesus had already taught:

“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”
—John 14:15

Jesus did not say that we earn His love by keeping His commandments. Obedience is not the price we pay to receive salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith.

However, love for Jesus produces a response. Genuine love desires to please, obey, follow, and serve the One who is loved.

Jesus also said:

“If a man love me, he will keep my words...”
—John 14:23

Love for Christ is more than saying, “I love Jesus.” Love becomes visible through obedience. It listens to His words, values His will, follows His direction, and cares about the people He loves.

Peter said:

“Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee.”

Jesus answered, in effect:

“Then care for My sheep.”

HIS LOVE CAME FIRST

God's love for us may rightly be described as unconditional because its source is found entirely within Him. He did not begin to love us because we were righteous, obedient, worthy, or deserving. His love was not earned by our goodness, nor was it offered as a reward for anything we had done.

God did not wait for us to love Him before He loved us. He loved us while we were sinners and demonstrated that love by giving His Son to die for us at Calvary. His love took the first step. Our salvation began not with our love for God, but with His love for us.

However, God's unconditional love should never be understood as unconditional approval. God loves sinners, but He does not approve of sin. His love does not remove the need for repentance, faith, obedience, correction, or discipline. A loving Father corrects His children because He loves them.

Our love for God is different in its direction. We love Him because He first loved us. Our love is awakened by His love, drawn by His grace, and made possible through the new life He has given us in Christ. His love is the cause; our love is the response.

Calvary is the greatest revelation of God's love. He loved us when we did not deserve His love, gave His Son when we could never save ourselves, and offered salvation as a gift that we could never earn. God's love came first.

Calvary revealed it.

Christ demonstrated it.

And because He first loved us, we now love Him.

THE QUESTION EVERY DISCIPLE MUST ANSWER

Jesus did not ask Peter, “Have you ever failed?” Peter had failed.

Jesus did not ask, “Have you always kept every promise?” Peter had broken his promise.

Jesus did not ask, “Is your love perfect?” Peter’s love was not perfect.

Jesus asked:

“Lovest thou me?”

Peter answered:

“Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”

Jesus knew everything about Peter. He knew his confidence, his weakness, his denial, his tears, his repentance, and his heart. Yet Jesus restored Peter and entrusted him with the care of His sheep.

Then Jesus said:

“Follow me.”

—John 21:19

That is where every true expression of love must lead.

Love for Jesus follows Him when the way is easy and when the way is difficult. Love obeys His words. Love serves others. Love feeds His sheep. Love remains faithful because His love first reached our hearts.

The greatest lesson in John 21 may not be found merely in defining two Greek words. It is found in the question Jesus asked and in the response He desired.

“Lovest thou Me?”

If our answer is, “Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee,” then we must also hear His words:

“Feed My sheep.”

And we must obey His call:

“Follow Me.”

The third cover picture tells the story of this booklet. The cross represents God’s love demonstrated for us at Calvary: “He first loved us.” The fire of coals represents Peter’s failure and the loving restoration he received from Jesus. The shepherd’s staff represents the responsibility Jesus gave him: “Feed My sheep.” Together, these three symbols remind us that His love came first, His grace restores us when we fail, and our love for Him is expressed through obedience and service.



With love and prayers,
Dave Weeks

LearningCenterMinistries.org