

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
21:15-17

15. So when they had dined, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon *son* of Jonas, 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. 16. He said to him again the second time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, do you love me? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you. He said to him, Feed my sheep. 17. He said to him the third time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, 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.

15.--[*So when they had dined.*] In the verses we now begin, we pass away from the region of allegory, parable, symbol, miracle, and vision to a plain, unmistakable conversation between our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Peter. It is a conversation of a deeply interesting character, of which every letter deserves to be written in gold. He who supposes that any "John," except John the Apostle, could have written these three verses, gives little evidence of possessing a sound judgment.

It is noteworthy that our Lord does not begin His conversation until the social meal was over. Trifling as this circumstance may seem, it deserves attention, and conveys a lesson. Nothing was so likely to set the Apostles at ease with their Master, and to prepare them to receive any word that fell from His lips with love and affection, as to deal familiarly and intimately with them, and let them "eat and drink" in His company.

[*Jesus said to Simon Peter.*] The object of our Lord in addressing Simon Peter in these verses should be carefully remembered and not misunderstood. That there was a distinct object in singling him out from the seven disciples sitting round our Lord, and specially speaking to him, I cannot doubt. But what was that object? This question can only be answered by considering the peculiar character of St. Peter and the peculiar circumstances of his history during the last day of our Lord's ministry, before the crucifixion. None had made so high a profession. None had spoken so confidently of his own strength. None had shown such instability in the hour of trial. None had fallen so sadly by denying his Master three times. Remembering all this, I believe that our Lord had a special object in addressing Peter on this occasion, and I see a special wisdom in the address and conversation being recorded as taking place before six witnesses.

(a) I believe our Lord's first object was to remind Peter of his sad fall, through over-confidence and lack of watchfulness and prayer. He would have him know that, though raised, pardoned and forgiven, he must never forget what had happened. Three times he had denied his Master. Three times he must be publicly asked whether he loved his Master. Hengstenberg maintains that Peter's fall was not at all in our Lord's mind in this remarkable conversation. But I cannot agree with him.

(b) I believe our Lord's second object was, as Cyril remarks, to restore Peter to his former position as a trusted Apostle and minister in the presence of six witnesses. The thought might possibly come across the minds of some Christians, in future days, that Peter forfeited his claim to be an Apostle and leader of the Church by his thrice repeated denial of his Master. Our Lord in mercy guards against this possibility by publicly commissioning Peter once more to do the work of a pastor in the Church.

(c) I believe our Lord's third object was to teach Peter what should be the primary aim of an Apostle and minister. The true qualification for the ministerial office, he must learn, was not high profession of more courage and zeal than others, not loud talk or even readiness to fight, but loving, patient usefulness to the souls of others and diligent care for the sheep of Christ's flock.

Calvin remarks: "The Evangelist now relates in what manner Peter was restored to that rank of honor from which he had fallen. The treacherous denial, which has been formerly described, had undoubtedly rendered him unworthy of the apostleship. For how could he be capable of instructing others in the faith, who had basely revolted from it? He had been made an Apostle, but it was along with Judas; and from the time that he acted the part of a coward and traitor, he had been deprived of the honor of apostleship. Now therefore the liberty as well as the authority of teaching is restored to him, both of which he had lost through his own fault. And that the disgrace of his apostasy might not stand in the way, Christ blots out and destroys the remembrance of it. Such a restoration was necessary both for Peter and his hearers. For Peter, that he might the more boldly execute his office, being assured of the calling with which Christ had again invested him. For his hearers, that the stain which attached to his person might not be the occasion of despising the Gospel. To us also in the present day, it is of very great importance that Peter comes forth to us as a new man, from whom the disgrace that might have lessened his authority is removed."

The Roman Catholic theory--that our Lord specially addressed Peter on this occasion in order to mark him out as head of the Church--is one which I repudiate as preposterous, unreasonable, improbable, and utterly destitute of solid foundation. Neither here nor elsewhere is there a tittle of evidence to show that any primacy was ever intended to be given to Peter. On the contrary, the fact that our Lord specially appeared on one occasion to James alone, and that afterward James was the presiding Apostle in the first Council at Jerusalem, would seem to indicate that if He conferred primacy on any Apostle, He conferred it on James. But there is no proof that primacy was conferred on anyone at all.

Burton says: "The profane and ridiculous pretensions of the Church of Rome are based in great part on the words of our Savior addressed to St. Peter in this passage. The Papists assume (1) that He hereby appointed St. Peter to be His vicar upon earth; (2) that St. Peter was the first Bishop of Rome; (3) that St. Peter transmitted to the Bishops of the same See, in endless succession, his own supposed authority over the rest of Christendom. Each one of these assumptions is simply unfounded and untrue; opposed alike to Scripture and to reason, to the records of the Early

Church, and the opinions of the primitive Fathers. With such fictions, nevertheless, do Romish writers distort the true image of Christianity; disfiguring their commentaries therewith and betraying with a reckless eagerness to obtrude their ambitious and unscriptural theory on all occasions, their secret misgivings as to its real value."

[*Simon, son of Jonas.*] This mode of address, thrice repeated in this remarkable conversation, is only used by our Lord on this occasion and when Peter first came to Him (John 1:42). I do not find that any Commentator gives a satisfactory explanation of it, and we are left to conjecture the reason. (a) Some think that our Lord purposely avoided the name Peter in order to remind the Apostle how on a recent occasion he had shown himself not firm as a "rock," agreeably to his name, but weak as a reed. (b) Some think that our Lord meant to remind the Apostle of the memorable day when he first began to be a disciple, when Jesus said to him, "You are Simon, the son of Jona." (c) Some think that our Lord would remind the Apostle of the day when he said, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona," after the good confession which Peter had made (Matt. 16:17). (d) Some think that our Lord intended to remind Peter of the lowly origin from which he sprung as son of one who, like Zebedee, in all probability was only a humble fisherman. (e) Some think that the expression was only used to distinguish Simon Peter from the other Simon, who may *possibly* have been in company as one of the two unnamed disciples (ch. 21:2). My own impression is, if I must give an opinion, that our Lord intended to carry Peter's mind back to the day when he first began to be a disciple of Christ, and to all the three years that had elapsed. It is as though He said: "Simon, son of Jonas, you remember the day when you first came to Me and believed on Me as the Lamb of God. (John 1:35-42.) You know all that you have been and all that you have gone through since that day. Once more I address you by the same name with which I began. Before sending you forth and commissioning you once more, in the presence of these six brethren, as a restored and trusted disciple, I ask you, do you love Me?" I throw out the thought as a conjecture. I see more in it than in any other view.

[*Do you love Me?*] The question that Jesus asked of Peter was very simple but very searching. It was simple because it appealed to his feelings. Even a child knows what he feels and whom he loves. If our Lord has asked "Do you believe? Are you converted? Are you elect? Have you faith? Have you grace? Are you born again? Have you the Spirit? Are you sanctified? Are you justified?"--any one of these questions would have been, perhaps, very difficult to answer. But Peter could surely tell what he felt toward Christ. At the same time, the question was very searching. It is as though our Lord said: "Simon, I know all your history. I know what you have done and what you have been during the time of my betrayal and crucifixion, and I am ready to look over all and pardon all. But one thing I must have in my disciples, and that is a sincere and loving heart. I can look over lack of knowledge and lack of faith, but I must have love. Now, before these six brethren, before commissioning you once more as an accredited and trustworthy Apostle, I ask you solemnly, do you love Me?"

Cyril thinks that Peter had received such special mercy, pardon, and forgiveness that he might be reasonably required to feel special love.

[*More than these.*] This remarkable expression, which is only used in this verse, admits of three interpretations. (a) It may mean, "Do you love Me more than you love these your brethren and friends around you, and are you willing to give them up for my sake and follow Me alone if need be?" (b) It may mean, as Whitby says, "Do you love Me more than these boats and fishing nets, among which you have spent so much of your life, from which I did first call you, and in the midst of which I find you today? Are you willing for my sake to give them all up and devote yourself to preaching the Gospel?" (c) It may mean, as the great majority of commentators think, "Do you love Me more than your brethren love Me? You remember a certain day when you confidently said, 'Though all men forsake You, yet I will not.' You were confident then that you were more faithful than others. Will you say that now? After all that has happened, are you sure that your heart is better than that of others?" I decidedly prefer this last view to either of the others. I think it was meant to teach Peter that the two grand qualifications for a faithful pastor were love and humility.

Musculus observes that Jesus did not ask Peter this thrice-repeated question as if He was ignorant and desired to learn, but in order to remind him before others of his future duty.

Bullinger suggests that one reason among others why Jesus said "more than these" was Peter's forwardness to spring into the water and come to shore before the other six Apostles who were in the boat with him.

Rollock observes on our Lord's merciful and loving dealing with Peter: "Rebukers should be lovers. If you rebuke a man, love him; otherwise do not speak to him, but close your mouth. If you do not season your rebukes with love, then that which should have been as medicine will be turned into poison. They who would be instructors and admonishers should be lovers. Therefore, whatever you do, do it in lenity [gentleness] and meekness. A bitter teacher is not worth a penny. This is what St. Paul requires when he says, 'The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle to all men' (2 Tim. 2:24.) All should be in gentleness; teaching in gentleness. Why? Because if gentleness be lacking, there will be no edification, no comforting, no instruction."

[*He said...I love You.*] The answer of Simon Peter in this verse is a beautiful example of sincerity and humility. He appeals to our Lord's knowledge of his heart: "I may be very defective in knowledge, faith, courage, wisdom. I am a debtor to mercy and grace above many. Yet, Lord, You know that, with all my faults and infirmities, I do love You." He does not venture to say a word about others. He does not pretend to compare his love with that of his brethren. If he has done so in time past, he will do so no more. "I know not whether others love You more or less than I do. I only know my own heart, and I feel sure that I love You."

Let us carefully note that love to Christ is one of the simplest tests of a true Christian. He may not feel sure that he is converted, or that he repents or believes aright. But if he is real, he will be able to say that he loves Christ.

[*He said...Feed my lambs.*] Having received from Peter a public profession

of his sincere love, our Lord proceeds to tell him how that love is to be shown, and to give him his commission for the future. He bids him prove the reality of his love by "feeding His lambs." When our Lord said "feed," I believe He meant that Peter was to feed souls with the precious food of God's Word, to supply them with that bread of life which a man must eat or die, and to watch carefully and diligently over their spiritual interests, like a good shepherd watching his flock. When our Lord spoke of lambs, I believe He meant the least, the weakest, and feeblest members of that flock which is His Church. It is as though Jesus said: "Simon, if indeed you love Me, know that the best proof of love is to devote yourself to the great work of shepherding souls. Live for others. Care for others. Minister to others. Do good to others. Seek out and search for my sheep in this wicked world and think it not beneath you to attend to the needs of the feeblest among them. Herein, remember, is true love. It does not consist in talking, professing, fighting, or seeking preeminence over others. It is best seen in walking in my steps. I came to seek and save those who are lost. I came not to be ministered unto but to minister. Go and do likewise. He loves most who is most like Me."

I cannot think that "lambs" in this place was intended to apply to young children, as it is often interpreted. All such interpretations I regard as nothing better than pious accommodations. I believe that lambs, in contradistinction to sheep, mean those who are young and weak in spiritual experience. Peter was not to neglect and despise them because weak. Peter remembered these ringing words, we may be sure, when he wrote in his Epistle, "Feed the flock of God that is among you" (1 Peter 5:2).

Augustine observes that Christ, both here and in the two following verses, says "MY" and not "YOUR." The Church is His property and not the property of ministers.

Bullinger observes that Christ passes from the calling of the fisherman to that of the shepherd, as representing more than any other callings the ministerial office.

16.--[*He said to him again, etc.*] This verse is simply a repetition of the preceding one, with three exceptions. For one thing, the expression "more than these" is omitted. For another thing, in the Greek the word which we render "feed" is a wider, fuller word than the one employed in the preceding verse. For another thing, our Lord speak of His "sheep" instead of His "lambs." By sheep I believe our Lord meant those members of His flock who were of more advanced experience and strength in grace than the class He had spoken of in the preceding verse. Both classes demanded the attention of a faithful pastor.

The repetition of the inquiry was doubtless intended to rouse Peter's attention and to impress the whole subject on his mind.

Lightfoot thinks that the "threefold repetition--feed, feed, feed, may most fitly apply to the threefold object of St. Peter's ministry: viz., the Gentiles, the Jews, and the dispersed ten tribes." But this seems to me fanciful. Bengel thinks it refers to the three periods of Peter's ministry.

Whitby observes: "Those who argue for Peter's supremacy above other Apostles, from this passage, are vain in their imagination. If by these words Christ required Peter to feed all His sheep and lambs, it is certain he was lacking in his duty. He never exercised an act of supremacy over the rest of the Apostles; but being sent by them, obeyed (Acts 8:14), and being reprov'd by St. Paul, held his peace (Gal. 2:11-16), and was so far from feeding all Christ's sheep that he never fed any of the province of St. Paul."

17.--[*He said to him the third time, etc.*] This verse again is a repetition of the two preceding verses, but contains two points of difference. For one thing, we are told that "Peter was grieved" on being asked the same question three times. For another thing, Peter uses stronger language when he appeals to our Lord's knowledge of his heart. "Lord," he says, "You know all things."

I cannot for a moment doubt that our Lord asked Peter this remarkable question three times in order to remind him that he had denied Him three times. Our sins ought never to be forgotten by us, though they are wiped out of the book of God's remembrance. The very grief which Peter felt at being thrice asked about his love was intended to do him good. It was meant to remind him that if he was grieved to be asked three times "Do you love Me," how much more must his Master have been grieved when he thrice denied Him!

Whitby observes: "Here is an argument that Christ, in Peter's judgment, was truly God. He says, 'You know all things.' It is to God alone that the secrets of all hearts lie open."

There are little nice distinctions in the original Greek of these three verses in the words that are used, which the English language cannot convey. But they deserve notice and are not without meaning. Two different words are used to express our one word "love." One of these two words means a higher, calmer, nobler kind of love than the other. This is the word that our Lord uses in the 15th and 16th verses where He asks the question "Do you love Me?" The other of the two words means a more passionate and lower kind of love. This is the word that Peter always uses when he says "I love you!" and our Lord once uses in the 17th verse. Again two different words are employed to express our one English word "feed." One means simply "provide food and pasture" and is used in the 15th and 17th verses. The other means not only provide food, but "govern, lead, direct, and generally do the work of a shepherd."

Some of the Roman Catholic writers try to make out that "lambs" in this remarkable passage mean the laity and "sheep" the clergy, and that supremacy over clergy and laity alike is intended by these words to be conferred on Peter and his successors at Rome! Archbishop Trench (on Miracles) justly condemns this interpretation as "groundless and trifling." He observes: "The commission should at least have run 'Feed my sheep and feed my shepherds' if any such conclusion could be drawn from Christ's words, though an infinite deal would still remain to be proved."

The lessons which the whole passage is meant to teach the Church of Christ are many and deep, and have been far too much neglected in every age. I can only indicate them and then leave the reader to work them out in his own mind.

(a) Love to Christ's person is one of the most important graces that can adorn a Christian, and specially a minister. Without it, correct doctrinal views, zeal for proselytizing, knowledge, eloquence, liberality, diligence in visiting the sick and relieving the poor, are worth very little and will do very little good. With it, God is pleased to look over many infirmities. A minister may be somewhat defective in some of his views, and even in some of his proceedings, but if he loves Christ and has a warm heart, God will seldom allow him to lack a blessing.

Hengstenberg shrewdly remarks that Christ's emphatic question about love to Himself and omission of any question about *love to God*, is strong indirect proof of Christ's divinity.

(b) True love to Christ is chiefly to be seen in usefulness to others, in doing as Christ did, in walking in His steps, in laboring to do good in this bad world. He who talks of loving Christ and idles on through life, never trying to do good to others, is deceiving himself and will find at length that he had better never have been born.

(c) A vast amount of so-called Christianity is perfectly useless in the sight of God and will only add to people's condemnation. Church goers and chapel goers who are content to attend services and hear sermons, but know nothing of fervent love to Christ's person and never lay themselves out to imitate Him, are in the broad way that leads to destruction.

Rollock observes: "A profane man or woman will say, 'I love God,' but if it does not manifest itself in an action, you are but a liar and do not love Him. Faith and love must ever show themselves in good actions. Have you a heart, hands, and feet? Do some good. Otherwise, if you never do a good deed, your profession of faith and love is vain."

He also says: "The pastor is not worth a penny who does not strive to get a sense of the love of Christ into his heart. There are so many difficulties and impediments cast before a pastor when he is about to discharge his duty, that he never can be able to overcome them unless he both loves the Lord and is sensible of the Lord's love to him. If the Apostles and martyrs had not loved Jesus exceedingly, they would soon have fainted."

Leighton observes: "Love is the great endowment of a true pastor of Christ's flock. He does not say to Peter, 'Are you wise, or learned, or eloquent?' But He says, 'Do you love Me?' If so, then 'feed.' Love to Christ begets love to His people's souls, which are so precious to Him, and a care of feeding them."

Scott observes: "Those who have been greatly tempted, and have had much humbling experience of their own sinfulness, and have had much forgiven them, generally prove the most tender, compassionate, and attentive pastors of weak, bruised, and trembling believers."

(d) The true test of reality in our religion is to be able to appeal confidently to God's knowledge of our hearts. It matters nothing what friends and relatives and fellow worshippers may think and say of us. They may praise us when we do not deserve it, or condemn us when we are innocent. It matters nothing. If we have the witness of our own hearts, that we can appeal to Jesus, the Searcher of hearts, and say, "You who know all things, know that I love You," we need not be afraid.

(e) If we really and truly feel love to Christ, we may thank God and take courage. Of our own faith, grace, conversion, and sanctification, we are poor judges. But do we really and sincerely feel that we love Christ? That is the great question. The very existence of such love is a good sign. We should not love Christ if we had not got something from Him.

Brentius remarks that Peter's charge to the elders in his epistle clearly shows that our Lord's thrice-repeated charge, "Feed," was not meant for him only, as the Romanists say, but for all ministers of the Church of Christ without exception. "The elders who are among you, I exhort: Feed the flock of God" (1 Peter 5:1).