

‘Lovest Thou Me?’

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‘Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these? He saith unto Him, Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee. He saith unto him. Feed My lambs.’ — John 21:15

Peter had already seen the risen Lord. There had been that interview on Easter morning on which the seal of sacred secrecy was impressed; when, alone, the denier poured out his heart to his Lord and was taken to the heart that he had wounded. Then there had been two interviews on the two successive Sundays in which the Apostle, in common with his brethren, had received, as one of the group, the Lord’s benediction, the Lord’s gift of the Spirit, and the Lord’s commission.

But something more was needed. There had been public denial; there must be public confession. If he had slipped again into the circle of the disciples with no special treatment or reference to his fall, it might have seemed a trivial fault to others, and even to himself. And so, after that strange meal on the beach, we have this exquisitely beautiful and deeply instructive incident of the special treatment needed by the denier before he could be publicly reinstated in his office.

The meal seems to have passed in silence. That awe which hung over the disciples in all their intercourse with Jesus during the forty days lay heavy on them, and they sat there, huddled round the fire, eating silently the meal which Christ had provided, no doubt gazing silently at the silent Lord. What a tension of expectation there must have been as to how the oppressive silence was to be broken! And how Peter’s heart must have throbbed and the others’ ears been pricked up, when it was broken by ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?’ We may listen with pricked-up ears too. For we have here, in Christ’s treatment of the Apostle, a revelation of how He behaves to a soul conscious of its fault; and, in Peter’s demeanor, an illustration of how a soul, conscious of its fault, should behave to Him.

There are three stages here: *the threefold question, the threefold answer* and *the threefold charge*. Let us look at these.

I. The threefold question. The reiteration in the interrogation did not express doubt as to the veracity of the answer nor dissatisfaction with its terms; but it did express, and was meant, I suppose, to suggest to Peter and to the others that the threefold denial needed to be obliterated by the threefold confession; and that every black mark that had been scored deep on the page by that denial needed to be covered over with the gilding or bright coloring of the triple acknowledgment. And so Peter thrice having said, ‘I know Him not;’ Jesus with a gracious violence forced him to say thrice, ‘Thou knowest that I love Thee.’ The same intention to compel Peter to go back upon his past comes out in two things besides the triple form of the question.

The one is the designation by which he is addressed, ‘Simon, son of Jonas,’ which travels back, as it were, to the time before he was a disciple, and points a finger to his weak humanity before it had come under the influence of Jesus Christ. **‘Simon, son of Jonas,’ was the name that he bore in the days before his discipleship.** It was the name by which Jesus had addressed him, therefore, on that never-to-be-forgotten turning-point of his life when he was first brought to Him by his brother Andrew. It was the name by which Jesus had addressed him at the very climax of his past life when, high up, he had been able to see far, and in answer to the Lord’s question, had rung out the confession: ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!’ So the name by which Jesus addresses him now says to him in effect: ‘Remember thy human weakness; remember how you were drawn to Me; remember the high-water mark of thy discipleship, when I was plain before thee as the Son of God, and remembering all these, answer Me — lovest thou Me?’

The same intention to drive Peter back to the wholesome remembrance of a stained past is obvious in the first form of the question. Our Lord mercifully does not persist in giving to it that form in the second and third instances: ‘Lovest thou Me more than these?’ More than these, what? I cannot for a moment believe that that question means something so trivial and irrelevant as ‘Lovest thou Me more than these nets and boats and the fishing?’ No; in accordance with the purpose that runs through the whole, of compelling Peter to retrospect, it *says* to him, ‘Do you remember what you said a dozen hours before you denied Me, “Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I”? Are you going to take that stand again? Lovest thou Me more than these, that never discredited their boasting so shamefully?’

So, dear brethren! here we have Jesus Christ, in His treatment of this penitent and half-restored soul, forcing a man, with merciful compulsion, to look steadfastly and long at his past *sin* and to retrace step by step, shameful stage by shameful stage, the road by which he had departed so far. Every foul place he is to stop and look at and think about.

Each detail he has to bring up before his mind. Was it not cruel of Jesus thus to take Peter by the neck, as it were, and hold him right down, close to the foul things that he had done, and say to him, *‘Look! look! look ever! And answer, Lovest thou Me?’* No; it was not cruel; it was true *kindness*. Peter was never so abundantly and permanently penetrated by the sense of the sinfulness of his sin, as after he was sure, as he had been made sure in that great interview, that it was all forgiven. So long as a man is disturbed by the dread of consequences, so long as he is doubtful as to his relation to the forgiving Love, he is not in a position beneficially and sanely to consider his evil in its moral quality only. But when the conviction comes to a man, ‘God is pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done;’ and when he can look at his own evil without the smallest disturbance rising from slavish fear of issues, then he is in a position rightly to estimate its darkness and its depth. And there can be no better discipline for us all than to remember our faults and penitently to travel back over the road of our sins, just because we are sure that God in Christ has forgotten them. The beginning of Christ’s merciful treatment of the forgiven man is to compel him to remember, that he may learn and be ashamed.

And then there is another point here in this triple question. **How significant and beautiful it is that the only thing that Jesus Christ cares to ask about is the sinner’s love!** We might have expected: ‘Simon, son of Jonas, are you sorry for what you did? Simon, son of Jonas, will you promise never to do the like any more?’ No! These things will come if the other thing is there. ‘Lovest thou Me?’ Jesus Christ sues each of us, not for obedience primarily, not for repentance, not for vows, not for conduct, but for a heart; and that being given, all the rest will follow. That is the distinguishing characteristic of Christian morality: that Jesus seeks first for the surrender of the affections, and believes, and is warranted in the belief, that if these are surrendered, all else will follow. And love being given, loyalty and service and repentance and hatred of self-will and of self-seeking will follow in her train. All the graces of human character which Christ seeks and is ready to impart, are, as it were, but the pages and ministers of the regal Love, who follow behind and swell the *cortege* of her servants.

Christ asks for love. Surely that indicates the depth of His own! In this commerce, He is satisfied with nothing less and can ask for nothing more; and He seeks for love because He is love and has given love. Oh! to all hearts burdened, as all our hearts ought to be — unless the burden has been cast off in one way — by the consciousness of our own weakness and imperfection, surely, surely, it is a gospel that is contained in that one question addressed to a man who had gone far astray, ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?’

Here, again, we have Jesus Christ, in His dealing with the penitent, willing to trust discredited professions. We think that one of the signs of our being wise people is that experience shall have taught us ‘once’ being ‘bit, twice’ to be ‘shy,’ and if a man has once deceived us by flaming professions and ice-cold acts, never to trust him any more. We think that is ‘worldly wisdom’ and ‘the bitter fruit of earthly experience’ and ‘sharpness’ and ‘shrewdness’ and so forth. Jesus Christ, even whilst reminding Peter by that ‘more than these,’ of his utterly hollow and unreliable boasting, shows Himself ready to accept once again the words of one whose inveracity He had proved. ‘Charity hopeth all things, believeth all things,’ and Jesus Christ is ready to trust us when we say, ‘I love Thee,’ even though often in the past our professed love has been all disproved.

We have here, in this question, our Lord revealing Himself as willing to accept the imperfect love which a disciple can offer Him. Of course, many of you well know that there is a very remarkable play of expression here. In the two first questions, the word which our Lord employs for ‘love’ is not the same as that which appears in Peter’s two first answers. Christ asks for one kind of love; Peter proffers another. I do not enter upon discussion as to the distinction between these two apparent synonyms. The kind of love which Christ asks for is higher, nobler, less emotional and more associated with the whole mind and will. It is the inferior kind, the more warm, more sensuous, more passionate and emotional, which Peter brings. And then, in the third question, our Lord, as it were, surrenders and takes Peter’s own word, as if He had said, ‘Be it so! You shrink from professing the higher kind; I will take the lower and I will educate and bring that up to the height that I desire you to stand at.’ Ah, brother! however stained and imperfect, however disproved by denials, however tainted by earthly associations, Jesus Christ will accept the poor stream of love – though it be but a trickle when it ought to be a torrent – which we can bring Him.

These are the lessons which it seems to me lie in this triple question. I have dealt with them at the greater length because those which follow are largely dependent upon them. But let me turn now briefly, in the second place, to —

II. The triple answer. ‘Yea, Lord! Thou knowest that I love Thee.’ Is not that beautiful, that the man who by Christ’s Resurrection (as the last of the answers shows) had been led to the loftiest conception of Christ’s omniscience and regarded Him as knowing the hearts of all men should, in the face of all that Jesus Christ knew about his denial and his sin, have dared to appeal to Christ’s own knowledge? What a superb and all-conquering

confidence in Christ's depth of knowledge and forgivingness of knowledge that answer showed! He felt that Jesus could look beneath the surface of his sin and see that below it there was, even in the midst of the denial, a heart that in its depths was true. It is a tremendous piece of confident appeal to the deeper knowledge and therefore the larger love and more abundant forgiveness of the righteous Lord — 'Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

Brethren! a Christian man ought to be sure of his love to Jesus Christ. You do not study your conduct in order to infer from it your love to others. You do not study your conduct in order to infer from it your love to your wife or your husband or your parents or your children or your friend. Love is not a matter of inference; it is a matter of consciousness and intuition. Whilst self-examination is needful for us all for many reasons, a Christian man ought to be as sure that he loves Jesus Christ as he is sure that he loves his dearest upon earth.

It used to be the fashion long ago — this generation has not depth enough to keep up the fashion — for Christian people to talk as if it were a point they longed to know, whether they loved Jesus Christ or not. There is no reason why it should be a point we long to know. You know all about your love to one another and you are sure about that. Why are you not sure about your love to Jesus Christ? 'Oh! but,' you say, 'look at my sins and failures;' and if Peter had looked only at his sins, do you not think that his words would have stuck in his throat? He did look, but he looked in a very different way from that of trying to ascertain from his conduct whether he loved Jesus Christ or not. Brethren, any sin is *inconsistent* with Christian love to Christ. Thank God, we have no right to say of any sin that it is *incompatible* with that love! More than that; a great, gross, flagrant, sudden fall like Peter's is a great deal less inconsistent with love to Christ than are the continuously unworthy, worldly, selfish, Christ-forgetting lives of hosts of complacent professing Christians today. White ants will eat up the carcass of a dead buffalo more quickly than a lion will. To have denied Christ once, twice, thrice, in the space of an hour, and under strong temptation, is not half so bad as to call Him 'Master' and 'Lord,' and day by day, week in, week out, in works to deny Him. The triple answer declares to us that in spite of a man's sins, he ought to be conscious of his love and be ready to profess it when need is.

III. Lastly, we have here the triple commission. I do not dwell upon it at any length because in its original form it applies especially to the apostolic office. But the general principles which underlie this threefold charge, to feed and to tend both 'the sheep' and 'the lambs,' may be put in a form that applies to each of us, and it is this — the best token of a Christian's love to Jesus Christ is his service of man for Christ's sake. 'Lovest thou Me?' 'Yea! Lord.' Thou hast *said*: go and *do*, 'Feed My lambs; feed My sheep.' We need the profession of words; we need, as Peter himself enjoined at a subsequent time, to be ready to 'give to every man that asketh us a reason of the hope' and an acknowledgment of the love that is in us. But if you want men to believe in your love, however Jesus Christ may know it, go and work in the Master's vineyard. The service of man is the garb of the love of God. 'He that loveth God will love his brother also.' Do not confine that thought of service and feeding and tending to what we call evangelistic and religious work. That is one of its forms, but it is only one of them. Everything in which Christian men can serve their fellows is to be taken by them as their worship of their Lord and is taken by the world as the convincing proof of the reality of their love.

Love to Jesus Christ is the qualification for all such service. If we are knit to Him by true affection, which is based upon our consciousness of our own falls and evils and our reception of His forgiving mercy, then we shall have the qualities that fit us and the impulse that drives us to serve and help our fellows. I do not say — God forbid! — that there is no philanthropy apart from Christian faith, but I do say that, on the wide scale, and in the long run, they who are knit to Jesus Christ by love will be those who render the greatest help to all that are 'afflicted in mind, body, or estate.' The true basis and qualification for efficient service of our fellows is the utter surrender of our hearts to Him who is the Fountain of love and from whom comes all our power to live in the world, as the images and embodiments of the love which has saved us that we might help to save others.

Brethren! let us all ask ourselves Christ's question to the denier. Let us look our past evils full in the face, that we may learn to hate them and that we may learn more the width and the sweep of the power of His pardoning mercy. God grant that we may all be able to say, 'Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee!'