

SERMON TEXT: John 21:15–19

SERMON TITLE: Christ the Object of It All—Our Supreme Love

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Intro: In February of this year, CBS Pittsburgh ran a special report on ship bearing the name of their city. The Longest Ship in the World - The U.S.S. Pittsburgh - It was first commissioned during World War II as a heavy cruiser with heavy artillery, large 9, 8-inch guns, and it was equipped with catapults for launching planes. It served to offer heavy cover for land invasions during the war. It successfully served during the war; however, another force decommissioned the mighty cruiser. While in the "theater of operations in June of 1945," a typhoon broke 103 feet of the bow broke off and sank to the bottom of the Pacific. The stern of the cruiser was hauled back to Washington state earning it the nickname, "The Longest Ship in the World" with its stern in Washington and its bow somewhere in the Pacific!

While the stern had weathered the storm and made it home, the loss of the bow decommissioned the heavy cruiser in March of 1947, preventing it from an immediate return to action while it awaited repairs.

Main Intro:

Sub-Intro: Some form of the verb λέγω is used by John fourteen times in these five verses. Four times, John used the aorist form, which are in verses 17 and 19 where John explained a few things as the eyewitness narrator of this interaction. Ten times, he used the present form, which functions to transport the reader right into the conversation as its taking place (vividness of the historical present or the internal aspect of the present?). Jesus questioned Peter twice using the verb ἀπαγάω and the third time using the same verb as Peter does in each of his replies (as well as John's narration in v. 17)—φιλέω. There's also variation in the verb "know" and in the shepherding language - v. 15 βοσκει τα αρνιά μου, v. 16 ποιμαινε τα προβατα μου, v. 17 βοσκει τα προβατα μου. Another important focus of attention should be the context that developed to lead up to this questioning and recommissioning. Peter had promised to sacrifice all for Christ, even if all the other disciples fall away (Mark 14:27-31). In the garden when they came to arrest Jesus, Peter demonstrated that his promise wasn't entirely empty (John 18:10), but Jesus' aimed to drink his Father's cup, not to go down fighting. Throughout his discipleship, Peter had difficulty understanding that Jesus would willingly die (Mark 8:31-33; Matt. 16:21-28). Peter acted decisively to fight when the arrest came, but he denied the Lord Jesus three times once Jesus willingly offered himself to the Father's will (John 18:15-27). While perhaps these are denials from a place of theological confusion rather than from a place of disloyalty, they are real denials, nonetheless. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter privately (Luke 24:34). In the appearance here in John 21, seven of the disciples were present (21:1-3). Jesus' post-resurrection, private and public meetings with Peter seemed to have

restoration and recommissioning in view. Peter has denied Jesus in a public setting where at least John seemed to have also been present.

Therefore, while Peter had proven in the garden that he would die fighting for the Lord, Jesus wanted Peter to learn to give the Father's will his utmost loyalty, make Christ the object of his supreme love, and learn from the resurrected Christ that Christ's shepherds give their lives for the sheep.

EXEGETICAL WORK

Need: A Resurrection Informed Love for Christ (a spiritual loyalty deeper than control)

Subject: Peter's Accountability among the Disciples

Purpose: To recommission Peter to shepherd with gospel clarity

CPT: The resurrected Messiah focused on loyal love when he recreated mirrored moments to recommission Simon Peter to shepherding ministry.

Outline:

- Jesus recreated mirrored moments from Simon Peter's experience (21:15a).
 - Jesus recreated at least two scenes from Peter's days of discipleship - the first large catch in Luke 5:1-11 and Peter's denials in the courtyard of the High Priest in John 18:15-27.
- Jesus first questioned Peter's comparative love (21:15b).
 - What's the comparison? The commentators offer three options: (1) Did Peter love Jesus more than his former profession as a fisherman? (2) Did Peter love Jesus more than he loved his fellow disciples? (3) Did Peter love Jesus more than the other disciples loved Jesus? It is this third option that seems to be the focus of Jesus' comparative question considering Peter's previous commitment to never fall away, even if all the others did.
 - The verbs for "love" in this conversation and in John's Gospel: Aramaic or Greek?!
 - The question of significance regarding the verbs for "love," verbs for "know," and shepherding language may boil down to whether you think Peter and Jesus are speaking in Greek or Aramaic/Hebrew.
 - Regarding scholarship on Jesus' everyday language(s), scholars are divided. Peter Williams advocates for Greek and Aramaic as equally available in Jesus' and the disciples' language accessibility. I tend to agree that Galileans could comfortably move between both Aramaic and Greek in everyday conversation. However, what language did Jesus, Peter, and the disciples use when speaking privately in their group or one on one?
 - There are contextual clues that seem to indicate the conversation in 21:15–19 taking place in Aramaic. For example, the interchangeability of verbs for love may indicate that the

conversation took place in a language where there was one word for love, which would have been Aramaic. John narrated in verse 17, “Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” Here, John used the Greek word φιλέω for “love” to encompass all three times that Jesus asked Peter “Do you love me?”

- However, there are also contextual clues that seem to indicate the conversation taking place in Greek (e.g., use of the word “Yes”). Further, whether the conversation happened in Aramaic or Greek, what we do know is that it was written and inspired in Greek. So, we may want to expand our study to the rest of John’s writings to look for patterns in his Greek writing style. When we do, we find that John seems to use these two words for love interchangeably, not necessarily packing his word choice on each occasion with a significant shift in meaning. Therefore, what may best describe what we are reading is native Aramaic thinkers (Jesus, Peter, and John) speaking and writing in Greek.
- I emailed Dr. Peter Williams on August 14, 2024. He wrote back the following:
 - Dear Rex, I think the conversation works well in Greek. Not only is there change in the “love” word, but also in the “shepherd” word and the “know” word, and in the word for “sheep” (probata vs arnia). I cannot figure out why people get obsessed by the variation in the “love” word and ignore the change of the word “sheep”! —Peter
 - Another factor that should be considered here is the nature of inspiration, not merely human language capability, tendencies, and styles. God inspired Scripture so that every word and every part of every word is from him. Perhaps, the best way to make headway here may be to ask, “How might God choosing to inspire his words through native Aramaic thinkers and speakers in Greek writing help us understand him and his word?” In conclusion, there’s a lot here I don’t know, and I need more time to consider these things.
 - For now, I would like to focus our attention on the repetitive nature of the questions, answers, and recommissioning. Also, the mirrored nature of this conversation to Jesus’ earlier predictions and to Peter’s denials deserves our attention.
 - Jesus recommissioned Simon Peter to feed his lambs. The context of John 10 makes this a big deal. Jesus doesn’t want a hired hand. He wants a true under-shepherd, who will faithfully carry out the will of the Good Shepherd.
- Jesus questioned Simon Peter’s love a second time without the comparison (21:16).
 - Just as in the first question, Jesus used the verb ἀγαπάω for “love,” and Peter responded with φιλέω for “love” in his response.
 - Simon Peter responded the same as he did at first.

- Jesus recommissioned Simon Peter to shepherd his sheep.
- Jesus questioned Simon Peter's love a third time (21:17).
 - John narrated that Jesus third question caused Simon Peter to experience sadness (cf. 16:20) and distress. Note both John and Jesus use of φιλέω. Jesus' shift from using ἀγαπάω to φιλέω is notable.
 - Simon Peter responded without the "Yes, Lord" and instead replied that Jesus knows all and knows his love.
 - Jesus recommissioned Simon Peter to feed his sheep.
- Jesus recommissioned Simon Peter to follow him (21:18-19).
 - Jesus revealed the kind of death that Peter would face—not one of fighting but one in old age and at the hands of others, likely on a cross of his own for Jesus' sake. Peter's death, not his sword, would glorify God.
 - **"Those who want to be used significantly in God's service must be willing to make greater sacrifices for the Lord they serve"** (597).
 - Jesus called Peter to follow him in supreme love with the clarity of the versus and the resurrection.

THEOLOGICAL WORK

Tension: **Our love lacks faith when it despises the cross.** The only God who is determined the centrality of the cross to his plan. In the garden, Peter acted naturally and decisively to protect Christ from the cross, but not biblically, theologically, and spiritually. Christ continued his consistent rebuke of Peter, who consistently denied the cross of Christ throughout his discipleship. Would Peter's love be able to handle the cross?

Transition: In the writings of the apostles after Christ's resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the cross of Christ became central to Christian faith. This is also apparent the writings of the subsequent generations of early Christians as they wrote about the faith.

"I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise, for I observed that you are established in an unshakable faith, having been nailed, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in both body and spirit, and firmly established in love by the blood of Christ, totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him (Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 1:1).

For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist; and whoever does not acknowledge the testimony of the cross is of the devil; and whoever twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires and claims that there is neither resurrection nor judgment—well, that person is the firstborn of Satan." (Polycarp to the Philippians 7:1).

Truth: Peter's problem was the cross, and **the resurrection has the power to correct the one who despises the cross**. The resurrection provides the power to reimagine and properly orient our lives to a cross-shaped love and ministry for the Lord. Only the grace and Spirit of the true gospel can equip us for spiritual union with Christ and the cost of faithful ministry.

Purpose Bridge: To love Christ and his gospel supremely

HOMILETICAL WORK

Need: The exact questioning of the priority of our love for Christ

Subject: The centrality of the cross

Purpose: To receive recommissioning for disciple shaping and making.

CPS: **Receive a recommissioning** by a cross-examination of your supreme love.

Outline:

- **Consider** your conversion and calling—the origin of your love for Christ.
- **Repent** of consistent cross-resistance (mirrored encounters with the risen Christ).
- **Obey** a cross-shaped S/spirituality (Rom. 6 - union with Christ in his death and resurrection).
- **Shepherd** for the Shepherd (John 10 - the lambs and sheep belong to him).
- **Shepherd** like the Shepherd (John 10 - give your lives for the flock).

CONCLUSION:

Pre-conclusion: "As the Korean War called for a major restoration of naval strength," the U.S.S Pittsburgh was recommissioned on "September 25, 1951" and sailed on October 20 of that same year (source: Naval History and Heritage Command").

Main Conclusion: What do we need today from this Scripture? God's word presents with an opportunity to "Receive a recommissioning" today. How? By a cross-examination of our supreme love. Is the obedient Christ who satisfied the Father's will our supreme love? Or do we love a cross-less Christ and try to live in a cross-less Christianity? Brothers and sisters, there is no such thing. Allow the crucified and risen one to cross examine the priority of your love for Christ and receive today a recommissioning into the ministry God has called you to fulfill.

NOTES FROM ANDREAS KÖSTENBERGER IN HIS COMMENTARY ON JOHN

- He alludes to a potential private confrontation of Peter based on Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5. However, he explains that a public confrontation and restoration were necessary because of Peter's public denial in the context of the Twelve (595).

- He highlights the "déjà vu" nature of Jesus confrontation and commissioning of Peter in John 21:15–19. The charcoal fire and three questions mirror the setting of Peter's denials (595).
- He emphasizes that this conversation after breakfast is a reinstatement of service, not an elevation to primacy (596).
- Jesus' questioning and commissioning of Peter clarifies the central requirement for Peter's future ministry—supreme love for Jesus himself. Köstenberger writes, "Paradoxically, one who loves Jesus supremely will love those entrusted into his charge more, not less" (596).
- He agrees with the editors of the NET Study Bible that the use of two different verbs for "love" conveys distinct shifts in meaning. He offers two reasons: "(1) the fact that the word ἀγαπάω, said to convey the notion of divine love, is used with reference for human love—and evil humans at that—in texts such as 3:19 and 12:43, and that φιλέω, said to connote human love, is used for God the Father in 5:20 (where he is said to love the Son) and 16:27 (where he is said to love the disciples); (2) the presence of other close synonyms in the same section, such as the use of two words for "know" (γίνωσκω and οἶδα), and stylistic variants of "tend/shepherd" (βόσκω, ποιμαίνω) "my sheep/lambs" (ἀρνία, πρόβατα) in 21:15–17" (596).
- Next, Köstenberger deals with the referent of the demonstrative pronoun in the first question, "Do you love me more than these?" (597). The possible referents are (1) more than he loves these men (i.e., the disciples), (2) more than these men love Jesus, or (3) more than his previous profession of fishing (597). He shares that on some level all of these are true: "Peter must love Jesus more than he loves other people (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26) or his natural profession (Mark 1:16–18; Luke 5:1–11), and he is called to love Jesus more than these other men do and to be willing to render extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of his master (John 6:67–69; 13:36–38; 21:18–19). Indeed, Peter earlier had claimed a devotion to Jesus exceeding that of the other disciples (Matt. 26:33; Mark 14:29; John 13:37; cf. 15:12–13)" (597). Köstenberger concludes that the love Jesus asks of Peter is akin to number 2 above—he asked Peter to love him more than the other disciples loved him (597). He writes, "**Those who want to be used significantly in God's service must be willing to make greater sacrifices for the Lord they serve**" (597).
- The OT conveys God's yearning for "shepherds who are devoted to God, care for his sheep, and carry out his will (Ezek. 34; Jer. 3:15; cf. Isa. 44:28)" (597). The terminology used here convey the fullness of the task of shepherding—all that it takes—rather than focusing on the minutiae. Notice Peter's later words in 1 Peter 5:1–3.
- The purpose of the threefold questioning and commissioning may "reflect the Near Eastern custom of reiterating a matter three times before witnesses in order to convey a solemn obligation, especially with regard to contracts conferring rights or legal dispositions" (597). In other words, solemnity is being conveyed here.

- It is notable that when Jesus uses φιλέω, it doesn't bring relief to Peter but rather sadness, not because of the verb change, but because of it being the third time Jesus has asked him the same question.
- Quite remarkably, Peter doesn't offer proofs to fill in Jesus' "knowledge gap," but he trusts in Christ's knowledge of Peter's love. In a sense, Peter is saying, "Yes, but I know and you know that I need your help." Köstenberger quotes Raymond Brown, "If Jesus does not know that Peter loves him, what can Peter say to assure him? Perhaps at long last Peter has learned that he cannot follow Jesus in his own strength and has realized the hollowness of affirming his own loyalty in a way that relies more on his own power of will than on Jesus' enablement (cf. 13:36–38—significantly in response to Jesus' 'new' love commandment). Likewise, we should soundly distrust self-serving pledges of loyalty today that betray self-reliance rather than a humble awareness of one's own limitations in acting on one's best intentions" (598).
- "Stretch out ... hands" is a reference to death by crucifixion (598). See also John 13:36; 12:33; 18:32.
- Early church testimonies concerning Peter's death: (1) Clement of Rome (AD 96) in 5:4 of his letter claimed that Peter was martyred during Nero's reign (ca. AD 54–68). (2) Tertullian (AD 212) "asserted that Peter was crucified" (599).
- Finally, Jesus issued the call that began the journey for all the disciples: "Follow me." Jesus called Peter to love him with supreme loyalty that did not despise even crucifixion.