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THE SUPREME TEST - "Lovest thou me?"  
of Discipleship Jno. 21:15, 16, 17

Introduction: What do you consider the supreme test of Christian faith? Perhaps we would get many different answers from this congregation.

Early one morning, when the golden chariot of the sun was starting its daily journey across the glorious highway of God's firmament, rejoicing as a strong man to run a race, Jesus stood under its warm radiance and had an important interview with Peter. It was after a seafood breakfast beside blue Galilee. Jesus knew how the big fisherman loved to fish with his companions. The risen Redeemer asked the self-confident, boastful, manly, coward of a disciple who only a few days before had thrice denied Him; "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?"

Peter's first answer was easy and light-hearted; it came only from the surface of his mind; it was little better than, "Of course, I love Thee." But Christ's close and penetrating way of putting the question a second time overawed the disciple, and brought an answer from much deeper down. The third time, Jesus sent the question, like a sword, down to the bottom of the soul, where it drew blood, and the answer was a groan of pain out of the depths.

I. Negatively . . . Not, as many would suppose,

Not 1. "How much do you know about me? or Understandest thou me?"

A. Wesley said, "We may die content without the knowledge of many truths, but if we die without love, would the knowledge of many truths avail us? I will not quarrel with you about your opinions... Only see that you love our Lord Jesus Christ."

B. Knowledge alone may be cold and needs to be warmed by the heart's emotion.

Not! 2. "What special gifts of utterance do you have?" or "Confessest thou me?"

3. "What have you sacrificed for me?"

Peter, speaking of his self-denial, could say, "Lord, we have left all and followed thee."

~~B. The supreme test is not "Followest thou me?"~~

Not 4. "Are you zealous for me?" ... Peter was. Not, "Do you have the right kind of belief in me?" Peter certainly was orthodox.

Not 5. "Are you outwardly religious?"

It will be vain to reverence the Sabbath if you forget the Lord of the Sabbath,  
vain to love the Sanctuary & not the Gr. Hi. Priest,  
vain to love the wedding feast,  
but not the Bridegroom.

Not 6. "Will you obey me?"

7. "Do you fear me?" or

8. "Do you admire or respect me?" that.

A. Imagine a young lover talking to his fiancée like

B. When heathen priests killed an animal for sacrifice to prophecy future events, it was considered a sure sign of calamity to find the heart small or shrivelled. Here is the chief deficiency of many professing Christian offerings.

II. Positively ... the supreme test of Christian discipleship is a matter of love.

1. Why we should love Him.

A. For His wonderful Person

B. For His marvellous works

(1) Look backward and consider what He has done.

(2) Look upward and consider what He is doing

(3) Look forward and consider what He will do.

C. For His redemptive sufferings.

Addressing the Roman crowd after the assassination of Caesar Antony holds up the blood stained, dagger-torn cloak of the fallen monarch and says:

"If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.

~~You all do know this mantle.~~

~~Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through...~~

~~Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd...~~

~~Kind souls, why weep you when you but behold~~

~~Our Caesar's vesture wounded? Look you here!~~

~~Here is himself, marr'd as you see by traitors."~~

~~They all cry out, "Revenge! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill!~~

~~Slay!... Let not a traitor live."~~

~~And the subtle Antony replies:~~

~~"Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up~~

~~To such a sudden flood of mutiny.~~

~~I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts.~~

~~For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,~~

~~Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech~~

~~To stir men's blood. I only speak right on.~~

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(Notes on "The Supreme Test")

Christ's call to follow him (vs. 19,22) shows his willingness to restore Peter even though he had denied and failed Him. It looks back to his first call to discipleship (Mark 1:17);

it reminded Peter of the call to him again at the crisis of faith and confession at Caesarea Philipe (Matt. 16:24); it is renewed now as a sign of restoration.

Likewise when we fail our Lord, we know, and He knows, that we really do love him. Peter said, "Lord, you know I love you." Though it may not look like it, though we cannot prove it, though many things rise up to mock the claim, he knows that we do love him in spite of everything.

To us, as to Peter, Christ says, "I know you love me; now keep on following closely alongside of me."

We have not just one, but many calls to follow Jesus. Lancelot Andrewes prayed: "I thank thee, Lord, for my call, recall, yea, many calls besides."

And this call to follow him is a call to service.

The Moravians had as the symbol of their church an ox standing between an altar and a plow, with the inscription "Ready for either."

To serve him properly means to do His will, not ours. There are some congregations which seem little more than religious clubs run for the interest of the members, to maintain their comfortable traditions, but largely self-centered and not open to God's leadership to better ways to minister the Word of God to ALL people living in their neighborhoods or communities. They would rather exclude hundreds from their fellowship than to broaden the scope and nature of their program or image so as to appeal to a larger population.

Such congregations are too much occupied with taking their own pulse and the spiritual pulses of others, that they don't even know that they are lukewarm and spiritually poor and sick unto death.

There is only one acid test of true spirituality. It is love for Jesus. And if we love Jesus Christ, we will feed and tend his sheep. That is what all of our faith boils down to. It is failure to do this that is the chief cause of the church's ineffectiveness and slow growth in our day.

Our churches are breathlessly busy about many things - many programs, meetings, causes and campaigns. But we are too often busy about a multitude of lesser and secondary matters, forgetting that Christ stresses shepherding the flock and tending it. We are to give ourselves to these ministries. What have you done this last year to feed, tend, shepherd, nurture, and build up the flock of God, so that they can grow and mature in Christlikeness, discipleship, and Christian service? This is the real question. This is hard work.

Dogged, tiring, persistent, faithful ministries by the whole church to build its own members up in the faith, and to reach out into the community and win others and help them to grow in the faith

is of the highest priority in the church, and to neglect it is disastrous. This is our only hope, and without it the church cannot manage to keep its head above the swirling waters of secularism of our day. Jesus said, "Follow me; I know you love me; now tend and feed my sheep, so they can reach out and win the other sheep which I have which are not of this particular fold as yet."

I tell you what you yourselves do know,  
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths  
And bid them speak for me."

--- So I would show you the wounds of our sweet Savior,  
and bid these eloquent mouths speak of His love for  
(See extra page of notes)\*

2. The Manifestation of this love -- "Feed My Sheep"

A. Christ said, "other sheep I have"

This is the call of lost sheep everywhere.  
Evangelism must be the magnificent obsession of  
all Baptists and all Christians.

Love must have an exercise as well as an object.  
Your deeds will show whether you are a true  
lover of Christ or a proud pretender.

B. How we can feed His sheep.

(1) By witnessing and teaching

(2) By our prayers

(3) By our contributions

(4) By going with the gospel wherever and however

He sends us.

There was once a man who worked in the woodland  
office of a lumber mill. On his way to work every  
morning he always noticed a little white dog standing  
guard beside a certain bush on which was hanging  
a leather jacket and a metal lunch box. Regardless of  
what happened, the brave little dog never left the  
jacket or lunch box, and never betrayed the trust his  
master had placed in him. No one dared come  
near that spot either! One afternoon there was a fierce  
forest fire in this area, and after it had burned itself  
out the office man made his way home. Remembering the  
accustomed spot he looked to see about the little dog.  
There, sure enough was the charred carcass, faithful  
even unto death, keeping watch over the melted lunch box  
and the smoking remains of a leather jacket. As the man  
stood watching through misty eyes, the little dog's  
master came out of the forest and said,  
"You know, mister, I always had to be careful what  
I told him to do."

This is the supreme test. Do we dare confess in  
truth that we really love him? I am sure most of us can.  
If any, however, up until this hour, could not so answer

