

THE KNIGHTSVILLE LAMP

DO YOU LOVE ME?

“Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble” (Mt. 26:33). So Peter confidently declared...just before he stumbled. Badly stumbled. In the gospel accounts various statements are made concerning what the disciples believed about Jesus. It was Peter who affirmed: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mt. 16:16). It was—Peter—who said, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (Jn 6:68). But one thing we don’t hear Peter say or any of the apostles for that matter, was that he loved Jesus.

After His resurrection, when Jesus met with some of the disciples in Galilee, He challenged Peter on his deeper motives with a thrice repeated question: *“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?”* (Jn. 21:15-17). Is it a coincidence that Jesus asked this question three times - the same number of times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus? There is no doubt that Peter’s denial would have been weighing heavy on his heart, and we would understand if Peter remained chronically disappointed in and unsure of himself following such a humiliating failure. But I suggest that Jesus asks this question in order to 1) cause Peter to confront his deeper commitment to the Lord, and 2) reaffirm Peter’s sense of purpose for the remainder of his life.

The exchange isn’t quite as obvious in English as it is in Greek, so I’ll reproduce it with the Greek words added:

Jesus: “Do you love (agapao) Me more than these?” (Jn. 21:15)

Peter: “You know that I love (phileo) You.”

Jesus: “Do you love (agapao) Me?” 9Jn. 21:16)

Peter: “Yes, Lord. You know that I love (phileo) You.”

Jesus: “Do you love (phileo) Me? (Jn. 21:17)

Peter: “You know all things: You know that I love (phileo) You.”

A lot has been written about the words “agape” and “phileo” and how they are to be distinguished. It is true at times they are used almost interchangeably. Merril Tenny writes: “The two words at times are used interchangeably in this Gospel (John, jj). Both represent God’s love for men, agapao in 14:23, 17:23, phileo in 16:27. Both are employed to describe the Father’s love for the Son, as agapao in 3:35, or 17:23,24,26, and phileo in 5:20, and they also denote Jesus’ love for men: agapao in 11:5, phileo in 11:3. The latter instance is striking. Since both verbs apply to Lazarus, a distinction between them cannot be pressed. Lastly, both indicate the love of men for Jesus: agapao in 14:15,21,23,24,28, and phileo in 16:27” (John, the Gospel of Belief, p 291).

But Tenny continues: “One may say that the frequent interchange of terms as exact synonyms does not mean that they are absolute equivalents, but only that they may be used as approximately equivalent in many cases. It is true that agapao is a more dignified term, while phileo connotes mainly emotional warmth and intensity” (ibid,p292). A parallel example might be the relation between the two words “mercy” and “grace.” We may use them synonymously in referring to showing compassion and forgiveness toward someone who is guilty of wrongdoing, but technically they carry different meanings and cannot be used interchangeably all the time.

That Jesus did not randomly choose synonyms is evident in Peter’s reaction to third question in which Jesus switches from agapao to the word Peter himself had used the first two times—phileo. John records, “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ (21:17). It is safe to say that Peter understood that Jesus deliberately

chose His words, and this choice troubled him. It seems that Peter is reluctant to claim the higher form of love—agape, the kind of love that is willing to do good for our enemies and bless those who don’t deserve it. Peter takes the more humble position by affirming his affection for the Lord. But when Jesus challenges even this, Peter must peer deeply into his heart to examine what is truly there.

Tenny continues: “Jesus was seeking to probe Peter’s inmost purpose I following Him. The desire for personal success, eminence, achievement, reward, or even the relatively unselfish motive of doing something for needy humanity was not enough. Only a complete love for Christ would be sufficient to carry him and his fellow— disciples through the careers which awaited them...Peter’s response undoubtedly was sincere. He had learned by this time that he could not trust himself, but he was penitent and willing to obey” (ibid).

Jesus had work for Peter to do: “feed My lambs; tend My sheep; feed my sheep.” If Peter had quit in despair, so many would not have benefited from his life. And so it is with you and me. Someone must feed the sheep. But like Peter, we have all at times demonstrated a very weak love for Christ. So the Lord’s question to Peter is pertinent to us: “DO YOU LOVE ME?” As long as we are breathing, we have a chance to grow in our love for Jesus. And He stands...arms outstretched...waiting patiently.

~ Jim Jonas