

John 21:15-19

- Feed my sheep -

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Introduction

- ❖ With this citation from AUGUSTINE in mind, I invite all pastors, bishops, evangelists to study John 21:15-19: “Let us, then, love not ourselves, but him. And in feeding his sheep, let us be seeking the things which are his, not the things which are our own. For in some inexplicable way that I cannot understand, everyone who loves himself, and not God, does not love himself. And whoever loves God, and not himself, that is the person who loves himself. For whoever cannot live by himself will certainly die by loving himself. The person, therefore, who loves himself while losing his own life does not really love himself. But when [Christ], who preserves life, is loved, a person who does not love himself ends up loving all the more when he does not love himself for this reason, namely, that he may love him [i.e., Christ] by whom he lives.” Tractates on the Gospel of John 123.5.¹
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of John. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ An outline of John 13-21:

¹ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007, p. 389-390).

John 13:1-30	The Last Supper
John 13:31-14:31	Final discourse – part I ❖ Jesus predicts Peter’s denial (Jn 13:36-38)
John 15:1-16:33	Final discourse – part II
John 17:1-26	The “Last Prayer” of Jesus
John 18:1-19:42	The arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus ❖ Peter’s first, second and third denial of Christ (Jn 18:15-27)
John 20:1-29	The resurrection of Jesus and the first appearances
John 21:1-23	The final appearance ❖ Jesus reinstates Peter (Jn 21:15-19)
John 21:24-25	The final words of the Beloved Disciple

Form and structure

❖ John 21:15-19

<i>The first question and commission (verse 15)</i>	¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”
<i>The second question and commission (verse 16)</i>	¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”
<i>The third question and commission (verse 17)</i>	¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”
<i>Jesus reveals Peter’s destiny (verse 18)</i>	¹⁸ I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to

	go.”
<i>Comment by John (verse 19)</i>	¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.
<i>Jesus final call (verse19)</i>	Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Technical notes and theological background

❖ The following words in this passage need attention:

- Love = “**ἀγαπάω**”: **1. to have a warm regard for and interest in another, cherish, have affection for, love.**²
 - The verb “to love” is used 37 times in this gospel and the substantive “love” 7 times. These words are also very prominent in the Letters of John: the substantive “love” is used 21 times and the verb “to love” 31 times.
- Love = “**φιλέω**”: **1. to have a special interest in someone or something, frequently with focus on close association, have affection for, like, consider someone a friend.**³
- Compare the three questions and the answers of Peter:

“Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? ”	Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων;
“Simon son of John, do you truly love me? ”	Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με;
“Simon son of John, do you love me? ”	Σίμων Ἰωάννου, φιλεῖς με;
“Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. ”	κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε.

² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p.5).

³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 1056).

- Both words are used interchangeably. The NIV translates ἀγαπάω with “do you truly love” and φιλέω simply with “do you love.” There might be a slight shift in meaning, but this is not warranted by the answer of Peter: “I love you.” In his answer, he uses the last word used by Jesus, φιλέω.
 - Feed = “βόσκω”:
 - 1. **to tend to the needs of animals, herd, tend, of herders** (lambs, Jn 21:15; sheep, Jn 21:17; also swine, Lk 15:15; ὁ βόσκων = *herdsman*, Mt 8:33; Mk 5:14; Lk 8:34).⁴
 - Newman and Nida comment: “**Take care of is better than the more limited meaning “feed” found in most translations.**”⁵
 - Take care of = “ποιμαίνω”:
 - 1. **to serve as tender of sheep, herd, tend, (lead to) pasture; 2. to watch out for other people, to shepherd, of activity that protects, rules, governs, fosters: of the direction of a congregation, tend God’s flock** (1 Pt 5:2; Jn 21:16).⁶
 - Newman and Nida comment: “The object of these verses is *lambs (arnion)* in verse 15 and *sheep (probaton)* in verses 16 and 17. Translators sometimes make a distinction, but these nouns are probably used synonymously in the present context. Variation in the choice of nouns and verbs is a stylistic feature of the Johannine writer, and no real distinction in meaning should be looked for either in this passage. That different verbs and different nouns are used here to describe the same event and object is no more significant than the use of three different words for “fish” in verses 5–13. In verse 17 there is some manuscript support for the reading *probaton*, technically meaning “little sheep” (Living Bible). However, the rendering “little sheep” does not appear in any of the major translations.”⁷
- ❖ “I tell you the truth” = “Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι”.
 - Used with future: “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open” (Jn 1:51; 5:25; 13:21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18).
 - Used with a condition: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (Jn 3:3; 3:5; 8:54; 12:24).
 - Used as assurance: “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know” (Jn 3:11; 5:19, 24; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 58; 10:1, 7; 13:16, 20).

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 181).

⁵ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1993, p. 632).

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 842).

⁷ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1993, p. 633).

Exposition

Verse 15-17

- ❖ **“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John.”**
 - **“Jesus.”** He is the resurrected One. He conquered death. He is Lord and God (Jn 20:28; 21:7).
 - It was after ‘breakfast’ that morning, when Jesus appeared for the third time to his disciples, that he addressed Simon Peter personally.
 - John refers to Peter as **“Simon Peter”** or simply **“Peter”** (21:15, 17; see also chapter 13, 18, 20 and 21:1-14) but Jesus calls him by his previous name **“Simon son of John.”**
 - **“And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter)”** (Jn 1:42).
 - It seems to be that Jesus takes Peter back to the first time he called him.
 - Simon Peter needs to be reinstated in his former position after he has denied Jesus Christ three times (Jn 18:17, 25, 27).
 - Peter held a special position among the twelve.
 - **“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it”** (Mt 16:16-18).
- ❖ **“do you truly love me?”**
 - **“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”** (Mt 10:36).
- ❖ **“more than these?”**
 - Is Jesus remembering Peter implicitly of his boldness when he said:
 - **“Peter asked, ‘Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you”** (Jn 13:37). And: **“Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will”** (Mt 26:33).
 - There is an other explanation possible, because **“these”** is not clarified. **“These”** can also refer to the boat and the nets, **“these things”**, and the previous occupation of Peter.
 - The ambiguity might be deliberate.
- ❖ **“you know that I love you”**
 - Jesus knew Peter: **“Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!”** (Jn 13:38).
 - **“In his answer Simon Peter does not attempt to qualify his own love in contrast with the love which others might have. This may be interpreted as a recognition of his own failure to acknowledge his love for Jesus during the trial. In some languages it may be best to translate *you know that I love you* as ‘you know how much I love you.’”⁸**

⁸ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1993, p. 633).

- ❖ **“Feed my lambs”, “Take care of my sheep” and “Feed my sheep.”**
 - Jesus commissioned Peter (and the other disciples) to take care of his church, his congregation, his flock (Jn 10:14-17). This doesn’t mean that Peter will be the first one responsible for this task. See also Application.
- ❖ **“Peter was hurt”**
 - There are two possible explanations. Peter might be hurt because this was the third time that Jesus asked him the same question. Peter might be hurt because he was confronted with himself and his denial of Jesus.

Verse 18-19

- ❖ **“Jesus said, I tell you the truth.”**
 - **This is a dramatic shift in the discourse.** Some commentators state that this is an independent saying of Jesus. But looking at other instances where Jesus used the affirmative “I tell you the truth” shows, that there is a (strong) connection with the preceding verses.
 - Beasley-Murray points at: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).⁹
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 - Jesus is assuring Peter “this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” According to the tradition Peter has been crucified, possibly with his head down. This was not humiliation. With his death, similar to his Lord and Master, he will glorify God.
 - See also John 12:23: **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”** (Jn 12:28; 13:31, 32). “And I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn 10:15).
- ❖ **“Follow me!”**
 - “In the context *follow* means not only ‘follow as a disciple’ but also ‘follow in death.’”¹⁰
 - Peter must trust the Lord Jesus.
 - **Peter denied Christ three times, while Christ was facing the cross. Christ won’t deny Peter when he is facing death to glorify God.**

Application

General

- ❖ Praise Christ because “he can forgive and renew us and then use us in his service. Failure is never final with God. ‘You ask me what forgiveness means; it is the wonder of being trusted again by God in the place where I disgraced him’ (Rita Snowden).”¹¹

⁹ Beasley-Murray, G.R. (1987, p. 408).

¹⁰ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1993, p. 635).

- “A relationship with Jesus begins when, in his presence, we face up to all that grieves and contradicts God’s holy will in our lives, whatever this may cost us.”¹²
 - The words Paul wrote to Timothy, can be applied to Peter too (1 Tim 1:12-16). “I was shown mercy The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1: 13, 14).
- ❖ Praise Christ because he knows the heart and mind.

Verse 15-17

- ❖ **“you know that I love you.”**
 - Jesus said: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” (Jn 15:12-14).
 - “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23).
- ❖ **“you know”**
 - Nothing is hidden for the sight of our Lord. He knows our deepest feelings, and thoughts. He knows our anxieties and weaknesses.
- ❖ **“Feed my lambs”; “Take care of my sheep”; “Feed my sheep.”**
 - Note **“my.”** The pastor, the evangelist, the bishop, the pope is always reminded of the fact that the believers belong to Christ. They are responsible for shepherding them!
 - Christ is the good shepherd:

“The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (Jn 10:3, 4).

“I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—**and I lay down my life for the sheep.** I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:14-16). Compare Isaiah 40:11: “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Ps 95:7. 100:3).

 - The pastor must speak the words of Christ in proclaiming, teaching and pastoring.
 - Peter(!) wrote: “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: **Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care,** serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as

¹¹ Milne, B. (1993, p. 317).

¹² Milne, B. (1993, p. 317).

God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; **not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.** And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Pet 5:1-4).

- Paul said to the elders of Ephesus: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. **Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.** I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:28, 29).
 - **Shepherding requires wisdom(!), knowledge, faithfulness, perseverance, boldness, meekness, obedience to the Lord, prayer, love, righteousness and mercy** (Fruit of the Spirit; Gal 5:22, 23) and also **PROTECION** against the wolves like sheep (Mt 10:16), and during persecution.
 - “Following Jesus and loving Jesus mean accepting responsibility for Jesus’ people, a truth which is in need of rehabilitation at the present time. Commitment to Christ involves commitment to the church of Christ.”¹³
 - Augustin wrote: “‘Feed my sheep.’ Why? Because you love me, because you are devoted to me, I am committing my sheep to you. Feed them, but remember they are mine. Heretical leaders, though, wish to make their own the sheep that are really Christ’s. All the same, they are forced ... to set the stamp of Christ on them. They may make them their own private flock, but they still have to register them in the Lord’s name. Sermon 290.3.”¹⁴
- ❖ “Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’”
- The message of the Gospel can be hurting and confronting, and liberating of inward felt pain.
 - “It is almost as though the evangelist is affirming the well-known concept that for a person to become right with God and gain a sense of release from the past sense of rebellion that that person should face the reality of where the deviation or sin occurred.”¹⁵
 - “Off-the-cuff replies and well-meaning superficial responses to the risen Lord will not work in the call of Jesus to the life of discipleship.”¹⁶
- ❖ “Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’”

¹³ Milne, B. (1993, p. 318).

¹⁴ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007, p. 387).

¹⁵ Borchert, G. L. (2002, p. 333).

¹⁶ Borchert, G. L. (2002, p. 334).

- “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb” (Rev 14:4).
- “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’” (Mt 16:24-26).
- “**Follow me**” implicates “obey me” and “trust me, I will show you the way.”

Quotes

- ❖ “Coming to faith is analogous to falling in love. One cannot fall in love in the abstract. Love comes through an encounter with another person. The same is true of faith. If faith is a relationship with the living Christ and the living God who sent him, then faith can only come through an encounter with them. And the Spirit is the one who makes this presence known.”¹⁷
- ❖ Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador: “As pastor I am obliged by divine command to give my life for those whom I love and that is for all Salvadorans, even for those who may assassinate me. If the threats should come to pass I offer God, for, this very moment, my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.”
- ❖ APRHAHAT¹⁸: “O pastors! Imitate that diligent pastor, the chief of the whole flock, who cared so greatly for his flock. He brought near those who were far away. He brought back the wanderers. He visited the sick. He strengthened the weak. He bound up the broken. He guarded those who were well fed. He gave himself up for the sake of the sheep. He chose and instructed excellent leaders, and committed the sheep into their hands and gave them authority over all his flock. For he said to Simon Cephas, “Feed my sheep and my lambs and my ewes.” So Simon fed his sheep and fulfilled his calling and handed over the flock to you and departed. And so you also must feed and guide them well. For the pastor who cares for his sheep engages in no other pursuit along with that. He does not make a vineyard, or plant gardens, or fall into the troubles of this world. Never have we seen a pastor who left his sheep in the wilderness and became a merchant, or one who left his flock to wander and became a husbandman. But if he deserts his flock and does these things, he thereby hands over his flock to the wolves. Demonstration 10.4.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Commentary on John 14:15-21 by Craig R. Koester. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=934

¹⁸ Aphrahat. (2019, February 08). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphrahat>

¹⁹ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007, p. 387).

- ❖ AUGUSTIN: “Let us, then, love not ourselves, but him. And in feeding his sheep, let us be seeking the things which are his, not the things which are our own. For in some inexplicable way that I cannot understand, everyone who loves himself, and not God, does not love himself. And whoever loves God, and not himself, that is the person who loves himself. For whoever cannot live by himself will certainly die by loving himself. The person, therefore, who loves himself while losing his own life does not really love himself. But when [Christ], who preserves life, is loved, a person who does not love himself ends up loving all the more when he does not love himself for this reason, namely, that he may love him [i.e., Christ] by whom he lives.” Tractates on the Gospel of John 123.5.²⁰
- ❖ AUGUSTIN: “In this case, however, the Lord Jesus Christ is entrusting the slave with sheep he bought with his blood, and so he requires of the slave the capacity to suffer to the point of shedding his blood. It is as though he were saying, “Feed my sheep. I am entrusting my sheep to you.” What sheep? “The ones I bought with my blood. I died for them. Do you love me? Be ready to die for them.” And as a matter of fact, while that human slave of a human master would pay money for sheep destroyed, Peter paid the price of his blood for sheep preserved. Sermon 296.4.”²¹

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²⁰ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007, p. 389-390).

²¹ Elowsky, J. C. (Ed.). (2007, p. 390).

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