

## Why Did Jesus Challenge Peter's Love?

**John 21:15:** *So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord; You know that I love you. He said to him, Tend my lambs.*



In our last episode, we examined the deep lessons Jesus was teaching his apostles when he appeared to seven of them after his resurrection while they were fishing. His miracle of orchestrating the massive catch of fish was a direct throwback to his fishing miracle three years before, when Simon Peter finally gave up fishing to exclusively follow Jesus. The first fishing miracle was a message about giving up all else to follow Jesus and to learn to be fishers of men. The second fishing miracle was a message to now become those fishers of men and to step up to lead and preach. Jesus' next direct conversation with Peter in that context was his questioning the depth of Peter's love for him. Why would Jesus ask such questions right after showing such confidence in Peter and the other disciples?

Let's recap the fishing accounts and their lessons. We begin with the early fishing miracle.



Early in Jesus' ministry, he invited Simon Peter to follow him on three different occasions over several months. The third invitation came when Jesus, sitting in Peter's boat after a long night with no catch, told him to let down the nets again. Peter obeyed—and the catch was miraculous.

### **Peter's initial reaction to that miraculous catch of fish:**

**Luke 5:8–9:** *8 But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man! 9 For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken.*

### **Peter was overwhelmed, as he recognized the greatness of the Lord Jesus:**

**Luke 5:10–11:** *10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men. 11 When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.*

**This experience encapsulated the beginning of their call to follow.** ●●●●●✝  
**For the next three years, they would watch, listen and learn on a daily basis.**



Now we recap the post-resurrection fishing miracle. Jesus had previously appeared to the apostles in groups on two separate occasions. After receiving no further instructions from their risen Lord for a week or two, Peter decided to go fishing and six others joined him. This miracle also took place after a fruitless night of fishing. Though not recognized, Jesus was on the shore and instructed them to recast their nets on the right side of the boat. When morning came, again they had a miraculous catch.

**Now let's look at Peter's reaction to that miraculous catch:**

**John 21:7:** *Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord. So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea.*

When they were being called to follow, Simon Peter said *Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!* Now he can't wait to be with Jesus again!

**This whole experience would help them see the beginning of their call to preach and lead.**



The first fishing experience was the beginning of the call for Peter and the others to follow Jesus. The second fishing experience, after Jesus' resurrection, was the beginning of their call to preach the gospel and lead others to it.

Jesus is recreating Peter's past—not to drag him backward, but to show him how far his calling will now go.

**After this post-resurrection catch, Jesus would do even more for them:**

**John 21:9–11:** *9 So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish which you have now caught. 11 Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three and although there were so many, the net was not torn.*

John uses the rare Greek word *anthrakia*—*charcoal fire*—in only two places: the fire where Peter denied him (**John 18**), and the fire where he restores him (**John 21**). It never appears anywhere else in the New Testament. John could have used any common word for fire, but he didn't. He chose the same rare word twice to signal a deliberate connection.

Standing by that charcoal fire, the smell alone would have carried Peter back to the courtyard—the shame, the panic, the rooster's crow. Jesus is bringing him straight into the memory Peter most wants to avoid so Jesus can heal it. The sense of smell can immediately remind us of the past.

As a spirit being and their Lord, Jesus was showing the care and surety with which the call of the true church would be completed, by the power of God's spirit working in them. This lesson would teach them that Jesus would make them accountable, show them the way, and they would follow by preaching and leading others to him throughout the age of the gospel.

They would learn to lead by following and doing what Jesus did. Jesus was transitioning them towards this leadership. But, did they understand all of this at the time?

Not even close. Jesus promised them *another comforter* would come in Jesus' place (**John 14:16,26** and others), referring to God's holy spirit. After he was gone, it would help them to remember what was said. Jesus was planting the seeds that their memories, driven by God's spirit, would draw out and put in place.

We have the luxury of looking back and being able to connect the dots. They were living it and were nowhere near connecting the dots at that point.

**What Jesus does next:**

**John 21:12–13:** *12 Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples ventured to question him, Who are you? knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.*

This certainly would be an inspiring end to this post-resurrection manifestation of Jesus, as everyone is cared for, well-fed and unified. However, Jesus was nowhere near done teaching. Peter would become an even bigger focus.



**During Jesus' earthly ministry, he called Peter and others to follow him. This following was their foundation to be able to later shoulder the massive responsibilities of the Gospel once Jesus was glorified. Peter would be the central cog in this machinery of change. Now, after his resurrection and especially in the context of this particular fishing miracle, Jesus is laying out the responsibilities of their call to preach, nurture and lead.**

Jesus is laying down a foundation for something much bigger to come.

It's inspiring to know that Jesus always has, always does and always will put the best and highest interests of those who follow him first!

**Jesus is about to shake Peter up with his next questions.  
Why would he do that to Peter, especially at this point in time?**

Why shake him up when he's so inspired—when the miracle has just happened, when hope is rising, when everything feels restored?

It's comforting to remember that even during his earthly ministry, Jesus could read the hearts of those around him. Now that he has been raised and only has a short time with them, his urgency for stretching those who would be tasked with leading others would increase. They needed to see the depth of dedication that would be required. What better way to show this than to start with Peter!

This is where restoration turns into responsibility. Peter's love for Jesus now has to broaden to enable him to become a leader for others.


**The focus of the fishing experience completely changes:**

**John 21:15:** *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you love <25> me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my lambs.*

**Love:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #25; *agapao*; to love (in a social or moral sense): VERB

**Love:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #26; *agape*; from #25; love, i.e. affection or benevolence; specially (plural) a love-feast: NOUN

In Strong's, the words *agape* and *agapao* sound almost unimpressive—"affection," "benevolence," or "to love in a social or moral sense." But in the New Testament context, these same words take on a far deeper significance. Scripture uses them to describe God's own self-giving love—the love that sent His son, the love that acts without selfish motive, the love Jesus had when he laid down his life. Strong's gives the dictionary definition; the Bible shows the lived definition, and that's where the true weight of *agape* appears.

 "Do you love me?" (Do you *agapao* me?)

*Agape* is a noun; *agapao* is a verb.

- *Agape* is the *kind* of love—the deep, self-giving love that reflects God's character.
- *Agapao* is the action of that love—choosing what is good and sacrificial, even when it costs you.

We imagine Jesus turning to Simon Peter after breakfast, and we assume the others could hear the conversation. Jesus wastes no time in presenting the highest and most imperative point:

**For Peter to lead, he would have to develop this *agape* kind of love, as it is the love that defines both the Father and His son Jesus.**

**God's love:**

**John 3:16:** For God so *loved* <25> the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

**Jesus' love:**

**John 15:12–14:** 12 This is my commandment, that you *love* <25> one another, just as I have *loved* <25> you. 13 Greater *love* <26> has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Peter has heard Jesus talk about how God so loved (*agapao*) the world. He knew and understood that was the kind of love the Father showed the world. Peter heard Jesus say in the upper room, *This is my commandment, that you love (agapao) one another just as I have loved you.* He heard, he knew. So, when Jesus asked him, *Do you agapeo me?* Peter knows what Jesus is referring to. He knows what the example is, which is important for us to recognize.

**John 21:15:** (NSRV) When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you love me *more than these*? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my lambs.

*More than these*—they just had the adrenalin rush of a massive catch of fish AND seeing their Lord again. Everything was going along perfectly. Now Jesus is focusing Peter on the main thing; "Is your highest possible level of love focused on me and my work with you over the life you are accustomed to?"

In other words, “Do you love me more than these things you’ve always known—the fishing, the life you’re comfortable with, the world you came from?” Peter answered with *phileo*.

**John 21:15:** (NSRV) *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love <5368> you. Jesus said to him, Feed my lambs.*

 “You know that I love you.” (...I *phileo* you.)

**Love:** Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance #5368 *phileo*; from #5384; to be a friend to (fond of [an individual or an object]), i.e. have affection

You could say *agapao* is love that chooses at great cost, while *phileo* is love that feels deeply and stays close—the affection of a loyal friend. It’s a good love. Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you love me with the kind of love that will sacrifice everything?” Peter answers honestly with the kind of love he knows he can claim: “Lord, you know I love you like a faithful friend.”

Peter’s answer was honest and it was revealing because he is seeing things in a very different way than previously. Peter has humbly and reverently stepped beyond the brash statements he had made not too long ago.

**Peter, with his impetuous but sincere character, would say all the right things even if he wasn’t capable of living up to them—he wanted to be capable!**

**Matthew 26:33,35:** *33 But Peter said to him, Even though all may fall away because of you, I will never fall away. 35 ...Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you...*

*I will never fall away.* There’s the first statement.

*Even if I have to die with you.* There’s the second statement.

*I will not deny you.* That’s the third statement.

He makes these strong statements and means them, but he is not yet capable of following through. Peter begins to recognize his own faults and is now willing to be seen as the man he knows he is—a broken, sinful work in progress: *Lord you know that I phileo you*. He doesn’t use *agapeo*, because he knows he is not at that level yet.

How did Jesus answer Peter’s response of *phileo*? He didn’t say, “Wrong answer!” or “You didn’t really answer my question, Peter!” He didn’t show disappointment or anger. Jesus accepts Peter’s answer and gives him the work to *Feed my lambs*.

**Question:** "Do you love me?" (Do you *agapao* me?)  
**Answer:** "You know that I love you." (...I *phileo* you.)  
**Response:** "Feed my lambs."

**John 21:15:** (NSRV) *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed <1006> my lambs <721>.*

**Feed:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #1006 *bosko*; to pasture; by extension to fodder; reflexively, to graze

*Feed* here is the simple, literal word for feeding animals. Jesus begins with the most basic responsibility: give spiritual nourishment to the youngest and most vulnerable—the lambs. Jesus accepts Peter as a work in progress. He doesn't challenge him. He just gives him a job by putting the responsibility of the gospel work directly upon Peter's shoulders.

Peter knows he isn't ready. Jesus also knows this, but the mission is still to feed/pasture my little ones.

**Lambs:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #721 *arnion*; diminutive from #704; a lambkin  
 Thayer's Greek Lexicon: 1) a little lamb, a lamb

And notice Jesus calls them *my lambs*. They belong to him, not Peter.

The word Jesus uses for *lambs* here is used only once in the Gospels, right here in **John 21:15**.

**Everywhere else, especially in Revelation, it becomes a title for Jesus himself:**  
**Revelation 5:12:** (KJV) *Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb <721> that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.*

THE Lamb entrusts HIS lambs to Peter, who has admitted he is not in a strong position of readiness! Jesus is preparing Peter for a mission. **This mission could only be given to one who could be implicitly trusted.** We can see Jesus offering his trust to Peter by saying he would trust Peter with his lambs.

Here is what happens: Pentecost is when the holy spirit came onto all the believers. This is when "Christianity" began. Jesus is no longer physically present, so his followers need God's holy spirit—His power and influence—to guide them.

**Pentecost began this feeding of the "baby sheep." Peter rose up to accept the challenges put before him:**

**Acts 2:1–2:** *1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.*

They didn't know what was happening! A miraculous event was going on around them. This is how God's power and influence was introduced to them.

**The spirit would move Peter to lead, for Jesus had been preparing him for this moment:**

**Acts 2:14,16-17** (excerpted): *14 ...Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them... 16 ...this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 17 AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS, God says, THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND...*

Peter went on to quote the prophet Joel, explaining that this outpouring of the spirit was exactly what God had promised. What is happening? Peter is feeding the first "lambs."

It was Peter who *raised his voice and declared, Men of Judea, listen to me!* Why? Because Jesus had trained him for that position, and we see Peter doing exactly that.

**Much further on in the gospel's history, Peter as an apostle, elder and a foundation pillar of the church continued feeding the little ones:**

**1 Peter 1:13-16: 13** *Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; 16 because it is written, YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.*

Peter doesn't lose his focus on taking care of the little ones. "As *obedient children*, do not be conformed to where you came from." The younger ones would be much more likely to fall back into those things than those who had more experience.

In this first challenge, Jesus says *Feed my little ones*. And we see the Apostle Peter feeding his little ones.

**1** "Do you love me?" Then care for the vulnerable.



**After a fruitless night of effort, Jesus had just given the apostles a miraculous catch of fish and then fed them as well. His very next action was to confront Simon Peter with the reality of the future responsibilities waiting for him. Peter would need to learn to love Jesus on a whole new level. He was to guide all others in caring for and feeding the most tender and inexperienced new disciples.**

That was the mission. Jesus accepted his incomplete answer because it was honest. "Based on your sincerity and who you are, I am challenging you to take care of my lambs."



*What about me? How aware am I of the needs of my fellow disciples, especially those who are not as experienced in walking the narrow way? Who are the lambs in my life—the newer or more fragile believers who need gentle, patient, intentional care? Maybe it's someone discouraged or feeling invisible.*

Tending to lambs isn't glamorous, but Jesus didn't start with, "Lead my church, Peter!" He started with *feed my lambs*.

**Julie**

I remember a moment early in my walk when I was spiritually small. There was a mature brother in our church—literally a rocket scientist—brilliant, respected, someone far beyond my level of understanding. One Sunday during a break, I ended up sitting next to him at a lunch table. Everyone else drifted away, and suddenly it was just the two of us. He asked me a Bible question... and I was mortified. I didn't know the answer. I barely understood the question!

But instead of reacting with surprise or disappointment, his face lit up. He opened his Bible and, step by gentle step, walked me through one passage after another, showing how they connected. He was excited! I was excited! An entire hour went by, and he never once made me feel small.

That moment stayed with me. Someone like that took the time to patiently feed me, someone who was still learning. I saw those Scriptures come alive—Old Testament and New Testament weaving together—and I felt a deep sense of connectivity: to the Word, to the story God is telling, and to this brother in Christ who cared enough to guide me. That's what it looks like when a lamb is guided by a gentle shepherd. *Feed my lambs*.

This brother in Christ took the command to Peter literally, and the memory has stayed fresh for Julie. This is a tremendous lesson for us to take the time, be patient, be open, be giving, be enthusiastic and lift others up.

**Romans 15:1–2:** *1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.*

Building one another up—as Jesus told Peter, *Feed my lambs*. This is the beginning of the responsibility of one Christian to another, and it was put upon Peter's shoulders.

Peter was being prepared for a work that was entirely beyond his own personal capacity. Thankfully, Jesus was guiding him!

**Jesus' first challenge to Peter was to care for the young and needy sheep of his flock. What could be more difficult than that?**

In this experience, Jesus is planting the seeds of responsibility within Peter's heart and mind. This first seed of proving his love for Jesus by caring for the most vulnerable was just the beginning of what Peter would be asked to carry. The combination of Jesus' challenges, along with the begetting of God's spirit at Pentecost, would drive Peter to stand and thrive under this new and productive pressure!

Christians throughout the centuries have traditionally paired the three questions with Peter's three denials. That charcoal fire absolutely invites that connection—John wants us to remember that courtyard. But if we only compare this to Peter's past actions, we miss what Jesus is doing going forward. These questions aren't just about healing Peter's shame; they are preparing him for leadership. Jesus is moving Peter from following to shepherding, from affection to responsibility, from loyalty to sacrificial love.

So now Jesus stretches Peter further. Caring for lambs was only the beginning; love for him will also mean tending the maturing sheep—guiding those who had already walked with Jesus' message for quite awhile.

**Again, Jesus will challenge Peter's love for him, and he will again show Peter how to prove it:**

**John 21:16:** (NSRV) *A second time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you **love** <25> me? He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I **love** <5368> you. Jesus said to him, **Tend** <4165> my sheep <4263>.*

Same question; same answer, but a new, expanded mission for the response:

<b>Question:</b>	"Do you love me?" (Do you <i>agapao</i> me?)
<b>Answer:</b>	"You know that I love you." (...I <i>phileo</i> you.)
<b>Response:</b>	"Tend my sheep."

Tend the more mature sheep who need guidance and direction. Tend those who are already established. "Peter, you have to take care of all of them."

**Tend:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #4165 *poimaino*;  
to tend as a shepherd (or figuratively, supervisor)

*Tend* is a leadership word, a shepherding word. It goes beyond feeding and includes guarding, guiding, correcting and keeping the flock together. Jesus moves Peter from the basic task of feeding to the fuller work of shepherding maturing followers.

**One example of how this word is used:**

**Acts 20:28:** (Amplified) *Take care and be on guard for yourselves and for the whole flock over which the holy spirit has appointed you as overseers, to **shepherd** (**tend, feed, guide**) <4165> the church of God which he bought with his own blood.*

Tending is comprehensive work. It is more than just feeding. It includes all the caring work to keep the sheep healthy, vibrant and together, without disease, and out of danger. *Tend my sheep*—the whole, big group.

Obviously, this is a much broader challenge from Jesus. Here he is talking about keeping the entire flock of more experienced Christian disciples protected and in order. Jesus is pressing Peter to clearly understand that following him would require leading others. That kind of responsibility can't just be about words, feelings, plans or goals—it is about action—clear, selfless God-glorifying action!

Let's look at how Peter actually accomplished Jesus' challenge of *tend my sheep*, in Peter's own life and ministry.



**Over time, Peter would rise to meet this challenge with grace and strength. His life would now be defined as a Christian leader and not as a fisherman:**

**Acts 5:12,17-21:** *5 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people... 17 But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates... and they were filled with jealousy. 18 They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, 20 Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this life. 21 Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach....*

The apostles were given the ability to do signs and miracles through God's holy spirit, and they were drawing people to Christ. But the high priest was jealous of their work and had them thrown in prison. They were not to preach anymore. It was over.

An angel appears in the prison and essentially said, "Actually, it's not over; it's just beginning. Go back out and preach!" Then the angel miraculously freed them and by daybreak—not noon, not 3 pm—they were again out preaching. This is a powerful explanation of what they were driven *by* and what they were driven *towards*.

When word came that the apostles were back in the temple teaching, the officers quietly brought them before the council again. The religious leaders reminded them that they had been strictly commanded to stop preaching in Jesus' name, yet they had filled Jerusalem with this message.

**What was their answer?**

**Acts 5:29:** *But Peter and the apostles answered, We must obey God rather than men.*

"Sorry, but I'm tending my Lord's sheep!"

But Peter and the apostles answered. Who was the spokesperson? Peter. What was he doing? He was tending to the Lord's work. He would not be deterred. Yes, he was in chains, but an angel freed him and he was able to go back to fearlessly preaching.

### Peter not only shepherded, but he encouraged others to rise up in humility and do the same:

**1 Peter 5:1-3:** *1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd <4165> the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*

Peter could have introduced himself as, “I, the chief apostle,” or “I, the one appointed over you,” or “I, the shepherd of all the churches,” but instead he chose to label himself as *your fellow elder*. Peter’s own words present him as a humble co-laborer, not a solitary supreme leader. He saw himself standing *with* the elders, not *above* them.

One of the reasons this is such a precious scripture about Christian leadership is because when we look at the greatness of the Apostle Peter and the responsibility he was directly given, we still see him refer to himself on exactly the same level as everybody else. “I am your *fellow elder*. We need to do this together.” This shows a profound clarity and humility in tending to the flock, but *nor yet lording it over those allotted to his charge*. He knows he cannot handle all the work, so he delegated responsibility equally to others as well. That is the Apostle Peter!

Peter never had a lack of confidence, but before Pentecost it wasn’t yet anchored properly. Jesus was shaping a confidence that could stand firm in prison cells, before councils of authority, and eventually as a martyr in Jesus’ name. That kind of courage can only come from being God-dependent and not independent.

After walking with Jesus for three years, Peter truly understood the need for faith and courage in the face of changing times. He drew from his own challenges to build up the other disciples.

### Let’s read Peter’s remembrances of his own journey:

**1 Peter 4:7-9:** *7 The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent <1618> in your love <26> for one another, because love <26> covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint.*

This is remarkable! In **John 21**, Peter can only reply with *phileo*—“Lord, I love you like a faithful friend.” Jesus calls him to *agape*—the God-shaped, self-giving love that chooses sacrifice. Decades later, here in his own letter, Peter urges the church to show *agape*—not just *agape*, but *fervent* in your *agape*.

**Fervent:** Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance #1618 *ektenēs*; intent:—without ceasing, fervent  
 Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon: properly, stretched out; figuratively, intent, earnest, assiduous

*Fervent in your love*—means a stretched-out love—extended love—love that keeps reaching even when it's hard. It's love pulled tight like a muscle under effort; love that refuses to let go. Peter grew into the very love Jesus asked him to develop. It is so beautiful!

*Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another—why? Because love covers a multitude of sins.* Jesus loved Peter with *agape* and covered a multitude of his sins as such. So, Peter is taking his own personal experience and saying, “I know what the development of this kind of love (*agape*) can bring to you; grab hold of it and hold on tight—don't let it go.”

1 “Do you love me?” Then care for the vulnerable.

2 “Do you love me?” Then guide the maturing ones.

We can see the challenges of Jesus unfolding, and where they are bringing Peter down the road.

Preparing Peter  
to

**PREACH,  
NURTURE  
and LEAD**



**Jesus challenged Peter's love for him a second time by focusing him on the need for guidance and protection that ALL of Jesus' followers would have. In the physical absence of Jesus, Peter would again be called upon to set the standard of guiding, protecting and leading the flock. Whether the sheep were young or old, Peter would lead them towards Christ!**



***What about me? Am I paying attention to the spiritual health of those around me—not just the struggling little ones, but the steady ones who still need guidance, encouragement and honest shepherding?***

**Rick**

Shepherding proves our dedication to something higher because there are times when shepherding is uncomfortable. I've had experiences in my own shepherding privilege where I've been called upon to face those who were making choices too far out of the lines of biblical morality.

As a shepherd, we need to say, “Let's sit and talk.” This is uncomfortable, because if somebody is focused and determined to go down a certain road, but we don't believe it is a scripturally-sound road, what do we do? The first thing is we talk *to* them, not *about* them. We study together and go through what the Word of God says about the topic.

We pray with them after those studies so it all comes together. Sometimes these conversations are very uncomfortable because the person sees something in a different way, and we are trying to gently yet firmly say, “Thus saith the Lord. What are you going to do with this?” It's not easy!

**That brings us to the responsibility we all have:**

**Galatians 6:2:** *Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.*

Sometimes we need to do what is difficult. Jesus showed Peter it was going to be difficult, but he needed to step up.

It is amazing what Jesus foresaw regarding the needs of his true church and how he guided and challenged Peter to meet so many of those needs!

**Twice Jesus has challenged Peter to show his love for him.  
What would the third challenge bring?**

Because these challenges were so profoundly important for the work of the Gospel, Jesus' third challenge would be even more compelling. Up to this point, Peter's responses were that he did love Jesus with brotherly love, and we know that was true. Jesus however, would challenge Peter to dig even deeper with this love as well. Why? Because there was so much at stake!

There was one more layer—one more question to stretch Peter toward a calling he doesn't yet understand, requiring him to grow beyond the place that still hurts.

**John 21:17:** (NSRV) *He said to him the third time, Simon son of John, do you love <5368> me? Peter felt hurt <3076> because he said to him the third time, Do you love <5368> me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything; you know that I love <5368> you. Jesus said to him, Feed <1006> my sheep <4263>.*

Now a different question; same answer and an expanded mission.



**Question:** "Do you love me?" (Do you *phileo* me?)  
**Answer:** "You know that I love you." (...I *phileo* you.)  
**Response:** "Feed my sheep."

Peter couldn't have expected this third question, "Do you love me on that brotherly level?" Jesus is pushing hard, and the question grieved Peter.

**Felt hurt:** Strong's Exhaustive Concordance #3076 *lupeo*; to distress; reflexively or passively, to be sad

Thayer's Greek Lexicon: 1) to make sorrowful 2) to affect with sadness, cause grief, to throw into sorrow

The word used for Peter *felt hurt* is a verb that means to be deeply distressed, pierced with sorrow or emotionally wounded. It's the same word used for the disciples' grief when Jesus said he was going away (**John 16:6,20,22**), the rich young ruler who went away sorrowful (**Matthew 19:22**) and Paul grieving over sin in the church (**2 Corinthians 2:2,5**). This is a deep, painful grieving.

Jesus is pressing Peter to know that whatever he felt and stood for in that moment would need to be deepened to a level that he just could not at that point understand. Jesus compassionately recognizes Peter was not ready, but he was giving him an introduction to what he would soon have to put into action with the mission: *Feed my sheep*—all of his sheep, including those who may be weak in faith and need extra care.



This mission could only be given to one who was able to understand weakness and develop the capacity to overcome it. Peter was the right person for the job!

Jesus' pattern—*feed*, then *tend*, then *feed* again—shows a progression, not a repetition. He begins with nourishing the lambs, expands to the full shepherding work of guiding and protecting the flock, and then returns to feeding because nourishment is the core task at every stage of spiritual growth. Even mature sheep need food. Jesus is showing Peter that shepherding always begins and ends with feeding.

We have the advantage of reading all of this in hindsight, but Peter is in the middle of it and is overwhelmed! *What is happening? Why is he asking me the same question? Why is he changing the question? Doesn't he know I love him? Of course, he knows...*

But Peter will figure it out when the holy spirit comes at Pentecost. Jesus had to shake him up to make sure he had Peter's focused attention.

Remember, Jesus is teaching Peter to clearly understand that following him would require leading others on many levels, and that kind of responsibility cannot be about words, feelings, decisions, plans or goals—it is ever and always about action! Being out in front, walking the steps so others can walk in those steps. Clear, selfless, God-glorifying action! That's what *feed my sheep* is. It is being that person others can rely on.

**Later in Peter's life and ministry, he taught others about coping with the distress that he himself was going through with this challenge to grow into Christ:**

**1 Peter 1:3–6:** *3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been **distressed** <3076> by various trials.*

*Distressed* is the same word as when Peter *felt hurt*. He gets what being *distressed* is. He understood through the experiences of his own denials, his brash comments, his impetuosity. As he writes to the church—to the lambs, the sheep, the entire flock—he is telling them, “You will be beset by these various trials which will be distressing, but take heart. I'm saying this because I know; I've been there. Take heart in the glorious power of deliverance that is in the call to follow Christ, you *who are protected by the power of God through faith*. Peter grew into feeding Jesus' sheep.

**Many years later, as one of the 12 pillars of the church, Peter wrote:**

**1 Peter 1:22–23:** 22 *Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love (philadelphia, brotherly love) of the brethren, fervently <1619> (the adverb form of 1618) love <25> one another from the heart, 23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.*

Peter understands *ferve* love, and he understands both *phileo* and *agape*. (*Philadelphia* is *phileo* expressed within the committed bond of spiritual siblings.) The third question of Jesus was, *Do you phileo me?* Now in this later writing, *Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love (philadelphia) of the brethren.*

Peter learned the lesson of love and in turn, taught the lesson of love. He put together those challenges from Jesus. He was doing exactly what Jesus had prepared him to do.

**Jesus' very next words to Peter after this third pressing challenge give us a glimpse as to why Jesus was pushing Peter in such a focused way:**

**John 21:18–19:** (NSRV) 18 *Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)...*

After these three challenges, Jesus essentially tells Peter, “And by the way, this is going to cost you your life.” Jesus was truly preparing Peter for what was to come. Peter would be persecuted for his stand for Jesus, and it would cost him his life. Peter’s love for Jesus would need to grow not only intellectually, but to embrace it with his whole heart. This is why Jesus challenged him.

Within a matter of weeks at Pentecost, Peter would stand in Jerusalem—the very city that killed Jesus—and proclaim the risen Christ with a courage that brought three thousand people into this new movement.

**Julie** This was costly obedience. This reminds me of when my husband was a firefighter, he used to sit in the kitchen at the firehouse and read his Bible during downtime. He wasn’t preaching. He wasn’t trying to make a statement. He was just quietly spending time with God. But the other firefighters would scatter. They treated him differently. Conversations would stop when he walked in. He felt the shift—that subtle social cost that comes when your faith makes others uncomfortable. It wasn’t persecution. It wasn’t dramatic. But it *was* costly. And he had to decide whether he would stop to fit in better or keep sitting alone and not be asked to events on days off. It’s a small picture of the kind of obedience Jesus was preparing Peter for—when it costs you something, even when no one sees it but God.

**Here’s one example of Peter literally experiencing this kind of costly obedience as he served the Lord Jesus:**

**Acts 12:6–8:** 6 *On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, Get up quickly. And his*

*chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, Gird yourself and put on your sandals. And he did so. And he said to him, Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.*

Peter is in prison. He doesn't know an angel is going to come and rescue him! He is locked down between soldiers, chained with no way out except by the guidance of God. The angel comes, tells Peter to get up and *Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.*

Doesn't that echo back to everything Peter has already been told? We can see that during Peter's ministry, he didn't back down; he moved forward. He accepted the challenges of Jesus.

**Back to our account:**

**John 21:19:** *...After this he said to him, Follow me.*

So, we're right back at the beginning. Nothing about the call has changed—only the weight of the responsibility, which has now grown beyond anything Peter could have imagined.

Three questions. Three missions.

- 1 "Do you love me?" Then care for the vulnerable.
- 2 "Do you love me?" Then guide the maturing ones.
- 3 "Do you love me?" Then strengthen and sustain the whole flock.



**Jesus brings these challenges right back to Peter's beginning, to that first fishing experience three years before. Jesus challenged Peter's love to focus him on his whole experience, from his beginning to truly follow Jesus right up to his present face-to-face encounter with the risen Lord and the lessons on leading. Following and leading would cost him everything. Peter would humbly and eagerly accept, grow into, and accomplish this mission.**



*What about me? Where is Jesus stretching me into a responsibility I don't feel ready for—something beyond what I think is my capacity, but not beyond his?*

**Rick**

Talk about being pressed into something that is beyond you! This took place when I was 23 years old. We had a Christian youth camp I grew up attending. I became one of the counselors, and moved on to being assistant director of the camp for a couple years. There are about 40 kids that went to this camp for a whole week in the summer. There was a lot to plan, lots of responsibilities—the cooking, the lessons, the Vesper services and skits. It's a big teaching and logistical responsibility.

This particular year I was 23. We were at the planning meeting, and they were looking for the next director. Nobody is willing to step up and do it. Some people are nominated, but they decline. The room gets really quiet and somebody says, "Well, what about Brother Rick?" And I said, "All right, I'd be willing."

I was very young, but I had some experience. But they spent the next hour looking for somebody else, right in front of me. They called this individual, that individual—some three or four states away—to ask if they would be willing to serve as camp director. It was a powerful experience for me, because after a little while I'm thinking, "Um, I'm sitting right here. You just don't want me." Finally, there was NOBODY else, so they basically said, "Okay, let's move on with a vote." Some still didn't even vote for me then! But the point was, I was given the responsibility.

Traditionally the new director takes over as chairman for the meeting. I took over and called an intermission. I had to go upstairs to another room and regather myself. It was me talking to the Lord saying, *Okay Lord, I know You put me in this position, and I know this is something I need to know and learn. I just don't know what to do. No one else has the confidence in me; maybe I can't do it.*

We went forward and were able to get the job done. Interestingly, the next year, the exact same thing happened. I was still young, but it was a wonderful experience. I was stretched beyond what I could do. I was stretched beyond my capacity, and that, in many ways, has been the story of my life. Christian Questions did that to and for me, also, and it has happened many times in my life as a Christian.

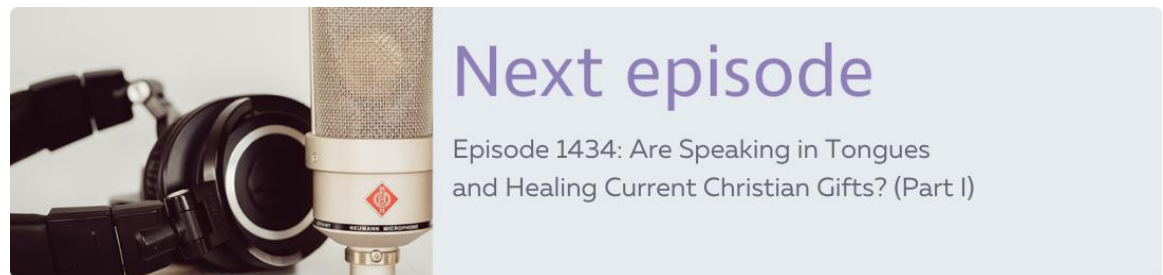
*Peter's love for Jesus was real, but it was incomplete. Jesus shaped it. He walked Peter back through his failure, restored him by the fire, and then entrusted him with lambs and sheep and a mission far bigger than himself. And he does the same with us. He meets us where we are, calls us beyond what we think we can do, and then gives us the grace and strength to grow into the calling he places on our shoulders.*

When we learn about how Jesus pressed Peter, each of us should be able to look at that experience and say, "If the Lord can see something in me, don't I need to just follow?" That is what the Apostle Peter did. We want to take his doubt, surprise and hurt at Jesus' challenges and see the results. Once the spirit came to him, his weaknesses became his strengths. He wasn't mistake-free, but he charged forward, knowing that by God's grace and His spirit, and by following in Jesus' footsteps, he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him.

What about us?

**So, why did Jesus challenge Peter's love?  
For Rick, Jonathan, Julie and Christian Questions...  
...Think about it!**

*All scriptures cited are from the NASB1995 translation unless otherwise noted.*



## Next episode

Episode 1434: Are Speaking in Tongues and Healing Current Christian Gifts? (Part I)



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## Bonus Material and Study Questions

**Recommended additional study:**

**Ep.1427: What Does Christian Love Really Look Like? (Christian Character Series Part IX)**

*Absorbing the depth and power of how unbiased love works*

<https://christianquestions.com/character/1427-agape-part-ix/>

**Ep.1225: Can Jesus' Resurrection Revive My Faltering Faith?**

*How the victory and love of Jesus forgave Peter's failed faith*

<https://christianquestions.com/inspiration/1225-easter/>



For children, parents and Bible class teachers, continue your studies on this topic with these short, animated videos for kids at ChristianQuestions.com/YouTube:

- **What is the highest form of love?**

<https://christianquestions.com/cq-videos/videos-cq-kids/what-is-the-highest-form-of-love/>

- **What are the different kinds of love in the Bible?**

<https://christianquestions.com/cq-videos/videos-cq-kids/kinds-of-love-in-the-bible/>

### **Focusing on a few of the Apostle Peter's teachings that reflect his amazing spiritual growth, maturity and leadership within the body of Christ:**

**1 Peter 4:12–14:** *12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

### **Have a humble approach:**

**1 Peter 5:6–8:** *6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. 8 Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

### **Do what you have committed to do:**

**1 Peter 2:11–12:** *11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. 12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

### **Stand for God without fear:**

**1 Peter 3:13–15:** *13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.*

### **Remember why you have the privilege that you have:**

**1 Peter 2:21–25:** *21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps, 22 WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, he did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

### **Grow in Christ and be faithful:**

**2 Peter 1:2–8:** *2 Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; 3 seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. 4 For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Stand with diligent watchfulness:**

**2 Peter 2:1-3:** *1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

**2 Peter 3:14-18:** *14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by him in peace, spotless and blameless, 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

# Study QUESTIONS

## Ep. 1433: Why Did Jesus Challenge Peter's Love?

See:



<https://christianquestions.com/inspiration/1433-why-did-jesus-ask-peter-do-you-love-me>

1. How did the earlier fishing miracle in Luke 5:8-11 change the lives of Peter, James and John? What shift do you see in Peter between his reaction to the first miracle catch in Luke 5 and his reaction to the second in John 21?
2. How does the Apostle John in John 21:9-13 indicate Jesus' love for Peter through the charcoal fire Jesus built in the post-resurrection fishing experience? (John 18:17-18) Why might Jesus choose to restore Peter through a sensory memory rather than a simple conversation?
3. How does the purpose of the Luke 5 miracle differ from the purpose of the John 21 miracle? What does each reveal about Peter's calling?
4. Explain the difference between Jesus' first question of Peter about love, and Peter's first answer. What was the first mission given to Peter by Jesus? When did he start fulfilling this mission? (John 21:15, Acts 2:1-2, 14-17)
5. How can you be more aware of the needs of your fellow disciples, especially those less spiritually experienced? Who are the "lambs" in your life? Why do you think Jesus begins with the smallest and most vulnerable rather than the mature? (Romans 15:1-2)
6. What was Jesus' second question to Peter about love? What was Peter's answer? What was the second mission given? Give examples of how Peter fulfilled this mission given to him by Jesus. (John 21:16, Acts 5:12,17-29, 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3)
7. How did Pentecost empower Peter to begin fulfilling the mission Jesus gave him? What does this teach us about relying on God's spirit rather than our own strength? (Acts 2:1-2, 14-17)
8. How can you pay better attention to the spiritual health of those around you—not only the inexperienced, but also the mature and steady? How does "tending" differ from "feeding," and why does Jesus escalate the responsibility?
9. How did Jesus' third question to Peter about love take Peter off guard? How did he feel about this, and why was it necessary for his restoration and future leadership? What was the third mission Jesus gave him? (John 21:17)
10. What does Peter's grief in John 21:17 reveal about his growth and about Jesus' method of restoration? How did the Lord shape Peter's very real love for Jesus into an amazing life spent serving the early church?
11. What about you? How is Jesus shaping your life? Where can you see the mark of Jesus "ferently stretching" your life into a responsibility you don't feel ready for?