

The Primary Motivation for a Happy Life

I concluded my previous article by looking at the meaning of Jesus' question to Peter in John 21:15. Let's pick up with Peter's response to the *first* of Jesus' three questions which pertain to how much Peter *genuinely* loves Jesus: Question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Response from Peter: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Notice now, Jesus' follow-up statement which is issued as a *command*: "Feed my lambs." Now the *second time* gives us the same sequence: Question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Response by Peter: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Command: "Tend my sheep." The word translated "tend" is a word that carries the idea of "to lead, guide, nourish or even to rule." It's a word that's often translated "shepherd." Now comes the finale:

"He said to him *a third time*, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was *grieved* because he said to him the *third time*; 'do you love me?'" We don't want to miss the deep anguish that we hear in Peter's response to Jesus. It doesn't escape Peter's notice that the *three questions* asked by Jesus correspond to the *three denials* of Jesus by Peter. Peter is deeply "grieved" as Jesus says this a third time. Peter responds in a way that may seem unexpected but is absolutely true. "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Peter is making a statement that includes genuine godly sorrow and true repentance. Peter is saying in effect: "Jesus, I couldn't love anyone more than I love you; I couldn't be more sorrowful than I am at the three times that I denied you. And because it's true that you know all things, you know this." Jesus responds with his third command: "Feed my sheep." There are a number of elements in this exchange between Jesus and Peter that may be important for us to understand. But the main point that Jesus wants Peter, and all Christians, to see is that our priority motivation for a life of following Jesus must be the motivation of *love for Jesus*. We won't do this perfectly, but if we're to truly follow Jesus from the heart we must be rightly motivated.

Pastor, professor, and author Kent Hughes relays a story pertaining to a Persian King from the Old Testament scriptures named Cyrus. Cyrus was the great conqueror of much of the known world at that time, which eventually included the kingdom of Babylon. As the story is told, Cyrus was said to have a general in his army whose wife was suspected of treason. This woman was tried before a great tribunal of the king. She was found guilty and *immediately* sentenced to death. After the sentence was pronounced, the woman's husband (the general) made his way to Cyrus's throne and made this request: "King Cyrus, please let me [die in] her place." King Cyrus paused for a moment but was clearly in awe of what his general requested. After a moment, Cyrus said to those who were gathered there that day: "Can we terminate a love as great as this?" Cyrus then pronounced that the woman could go free and gave her to her husband. As the couple left the presence of the King, the general said to his wife, "Did you see the benevolent look in [the King's] eyes as he pardoned you?" His wife

responded: “No. I only had eyes for the one who loved me enough that he was willing to die for me.”

Even though we can't possibly capture every aspect of it, this illustration helps us begin to grasp the heart of Peter as he sat across the charcoal fire from Jesus on that fateful morning by the Sea of Galilee. Peter was broken; he loved Jesus and he was truly remorseful for what he had done. Peter's words were an attempt to express his genuine love for the One who loved him first and who had been willing to die and, in this case, *did die* for him. It is this *motivation of love* for Jesus that Peter needed to properly understand because he would have much to face in the years after Jesus left this earth to ascend back to the Father. Peter needed to be a solid and faithful leader of these disciples and others and Jesus needed to help Peter learn the lesson of *genuine love*. Jesus was restoring Peter to a life of service which we saw was “Feeding [Jesus'] sheep.” Genuine love for Jesus is the *proper motivation* which is at the heart of appropriate and lifelong obedience and service to Jesus and others. This is the only kind of life that will, ultimately, result in genuine happiness regardless of what we may have to face.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.