

## Do You Love Me More than These?

In my previous article we looked at the importance of prioritizing our lives, a truth which has more to do with *who* we put first rather than, necessarily, *what* we put first. God's word given in the scriptures should always be our priority. Sadly—because of the intense pressures of the situation—Peter denied Jesus three times by prioritizing what he wanted in the moment, ahead of God's will. The *first denial* happened as Peter is standing by a charcoal fire warming himself just outside in the courtyard of the house in which Jesus has been taken by a band of soldiers to appear before Annas. A servant girl says to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" Peter responds, "I am not." (John 18:17) Peter is still standing by the charcoal fire warming himself when he's asked again, this time by an unidentified speaker gathered with a group, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" Peter responds the *second* time, "I am not." (18:25) Although John mentions the *third denial*, I want to reference the gospel of Matthew 26:73-75 where Peter was questioned about his Galilean accent and his connection to Jesus. At that time Peter begins to "invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'" After this, the text says that Peter went out and "wept bitterly."

These *three denials* of Jesus by Peter serve to remind us that—no matter how strong we may believe our faith is—circumstances and pressures in our lives can, *like Peter*, cause us to turn away from following Jesus, in a moment in time or for an extended period of time. And yet, one of the sad realities for 21st century Christians is that, *unlike Peter*, we may have denied Jesus so often that we don't even *weep anymore*. We may often find ourselves making excuses like, "Who can obey all the time? Nobody's perfect. Jesus understands my struggles. He has to forgive me because that's what he does!" Although it's true that Jesus forgives, we should never take his love and forgiveness for granted. It's important that we come to him in prayer with broken hearts and genuine repentance for our sins. Let's go now from, Peter's Denials of Jesus, to:

### —Peter's Repentance and Restoration

Although each of us sins daily in thought, word and deed; although all of our sins are committed, ultimately, against a holy God (Psalm 51:4); although we need to think clearly about our daily sins and repent of those sins (1 John 1:8-10); what we're focusing on in the life of Peter falls into the category of repentance from a *grievous* sin. Peter's denial of Jesus, the holy Son of God, was clearly an example of flagrant, self-centered, deliberate disobedience out of personal fear. He did this—not just once but *three times*—just as Jesus said that he would (Luke 22:34).

At this point in John 21, we're told of something very important that happens "when they had finished breakfast." Jesus speaks directly to Simon Peter and says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (21:15) Much has been written about this statement and its possible meaning. Scholars note that there are basically three ways that this phrase "more than these" can be interpreted: 1). Do you love *me* more than you love *these* disciples? 2). Do you love me more than *these* disciples love me? 3). Do you love *me* more than *these things*? The reference here would be to the fishing gear that's there in front of Jesus and the disciples as well as the nets filled with fish. In other words, "Do you love me more than you love your old way of life?"

Linguistically, the phrase could be understood either way. That being true, what do we see in the larger context that may help us determine Jesus' meaning? Peter has already stated that "even if I must die with you, I will never deny you!" (Mt. 26:35) It was Peter who sought to protect Jesus by picking up the sword and lashing out at the Malchus cutting off his ear (John 18:10); it was Peter who seemed to want to always be near Jesus (John 21:7). When all the evidence is considered, it seems best to accept the second option. Peter, almost certainly, believed that Jesus was asking him if *he loved Jesus more than the other disciples did*. If we were in Peter's shoes and Jesus were to ask how much we love him, what would our words and actions reveal about who we truly love? Although Peter's three denials were grievous, the pattern of Peter's life shows where his priorities lie. Even though Jesus asked the question, he already knew the answer. Peter truly loved Jesus.

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