

Are you really my friend?

by
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John 21:1-17 ESV

- (1) After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.
- (2) Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.
- (3) Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.
- (4) Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.
- (5) Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No."
- (6) He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.
- (7) That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.
- (8) The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.
- (9) When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.
- (10) Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."
- (11) So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.
- (12) Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.
- (13) Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.
- (14) This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.
- (15) 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, "Feed my lambs."
- (16) He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep."
- (17) He said to him the 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?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

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This passage of scripture may be one of those you have wondered about what was going on. Have you ever wondered why Jesus asked Peter the same question three times? You may have wondered why Peter gave the same answer three times. If you find these verses to be confusing, you are not alone. The reason that these verses are a little confusing is due to their incorrect translation. The problem is not because you cannot understand these verses; the problem is because the translators chose not to translate the verses accurately. I wish I knew why the translators made that choice, but I do not. What I can do, however, is to rectify this situation.

Here is the problem: the word "love" is incorrectly translated four times in these verses. While that may not seem like much, it isn't easy to understand the message at the core of these verses. To understand the questions asked by Jesus and the responses given by Peter, we must know the different variations of the word love and how to use them. We, therefore, need to learn about two of the Greek words for love.

There are six words in the Greek language for love; however, the New Testament only uses two of them. The two words the New Testament uses are **agape** and **phileo**. **Agape** is a selfless, self-sacrificing, pure, giving type of love.¹ It is something you do with all your heart. **Phileo**, on the other hand, is a friendship (brotherly) type of love, that also signifies fondness.² The word **phileo** denotes the type of love felt and given between family members and friends.

In the first part of verse 15, Jesus started by saying, "Simon, son of John." But, wait a minute, didn't Jesus give Simon the name of Peter? Yes, he did. Jesus gave Simon the name Peter (John 1:42) when Simon accepted the call to become a disciple. At that time, Jesus gave him a new name, Peter, stating that as Peter, he would become a "fisher of men" (Mark 1:16). So why is Jesus using the name, Simon? In this passage, Peter has reverted to fishing for fish, and Jesus responded by reverting to Peter's name before becoming a disciple. Peter has gone back to being Simon, and Jesus pointed that out.

Next, in verse 15, Jesus asked Peter: "Do you agape me more than these?" The word **agape** is correctly translated as "love" in this verse. Have you ever wondered why Jesus asked that question? Have you ever pondered about what exactly Jesus was asking Peter? I have wondered whether or not Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him more than the other disciples. I have come to a new conclusion: I don't think so. Let me explain why. Let's back up to the beginning of this chapter and see what was happening.

Verse three tells us that Peter had invited six of the other disciples to go fishing with him. According to Luke 5:3, Peter owned a fishing boat, so more than likely, he had returned to his old boat. Peter, the fisherman, was going back to his old line of work. Trained to be a fisherman, he seemed to be returning to his roots. The disciples knew that Jesus had risen from the grave and been resurrected from the dead but had only seen him twice. They had no idea if they were ever going to see him again. Jesus had not been

¹ Moises Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 107.

² *Ibid.* vol. 4., 605.

sticking around, and I think the disciples wondered what they were supposed to do with themselves. The disciples had spent almost every waking moment with Jesus for three years. Now that was gone. Peter was going back to the lifestyle he had grown up with; feeding the world with fish.

Peter and the other disciples spent the night in the boat and had caught absolutely nothing. When the sun started to rise, a stranger on the shore asked them if they had caught anything. Naturally, they shook their heads in disappointment and said “no.” The stranger then told them that the fish were on the other side of the boat and that they should cast their net over there. Oddly enough, they do just that. They didn't question the stranger or ask him how exactly he knew where the fish were; instead, they obeyed. They pulled up the net and cast it on the other side of the boat. Immediately their net became full of fish. So full that they could not even pull it into the boat. You can probably imagine Peter's excitement. Gone is the disappointment of a wasted night, replaced with the excitement of a full-to-bursting net. I can imagine that the disciples were laughing, pulling on the net, and slapping each other on their backs.

John quickly figured out that the stranger on the shore was Jesus and told Peter (who had not yet made that connection). Peter abandoned his boat and swam to shore, leaving the other six disciples with the task of rowing to shore (pulling a very heavy net). When the disciples reached the shore, Jesus told them to bring some fish so that they could cook them for breakfast. Peter and the disciples pulled the net onshore and then gave a few fish to Jesus. Their excitement must have been evident to Jesus. I wonder if he smiled and chuckled to himself.

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter (in verse 15), “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” When Jesus asked this question of Peter, I don't think his arm gestured to the other disciples; instead, he pointed at the net full of fish. I think he was pointing at the lifestyle to which Peter was returning. My opinion is that Peter planned to become a fisherman again, but Jesus had other plans. Jesus needed to rock Peter's boat. So, Jesus asked, “Do you **agape** me more than these?”

Peter responded, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” However, Peter did not use the word agape in his response. Instead, he used the word **phileo**. “Yes, Lord; You know that I **phileo** You.” Essentially, Peter said, “Yes, Lord; You know that I am your friend.” Interestingly, Peter did not use the word agape in his answer to Jesus. Instead, he used the term for friend.

If you asked your husband/wife (assuming you are married) if they loved you and their response was that they considered themselves your friend, what would your reaction be? First, you would probably think to yourself, “That wasn't the question that I asked. I asked if you loved me, not whether or not you were my friend.” Second, you might even question their love.

The response of Jesus was probably not what Peter was expecting; “Feed my lambs.” I wonder if Peter had that “huh?” expression on his face. What exactly was Jesus saying to Peter? The word “feed” is the Greek word “bosko - βόσχω” which is

used to portray the image of sheep grazing (feeding) in a pasture. The word “lambs” is the Greek word “arnion - ἀρνιον” and simply means baby, or young, sheep. If you are curious, a lamb becomes a sheep when it is 12 months old. Jesus told Peter to watch over the young lambs while they grazed in the pasture. Jesus referred to his followers as sheep. Therefore, a new Christian (someone who recently accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior) could be considered a lamb. I wonder if Peter (who still had that “huh?” expression on his face) thought to himself; *I’m a fisherman, not a shepherd.*

To fully understand what Jesus was saying by telling Peter to “feed his lambs,” we need to know how a lamb eats (or grazes). To understand that, we need to understand a lamb's digestive system. A sheep's stomach has four compartments: the rumen, reticulum, omasum, and abomasum. The largest compartment is the rumen, the storage compartment for quickly consumed food. This food is then later regurgitated, re-chewed, and re-swallowed in a process that is called cud-chewing. Sheep chew their cud when they are resting. The next compartment of the stomach, the reticulum, works closely with the rumen. Stomach contents go back and forth, mixing continually between the two sections. Relatively little digestive activity occurs in the next compartment, the omasum. The final chamber, the abomasum, is the digestive portion of the stomach. The abomasum is where the enzymes and acids break down the food into nutrients that flow into the bloodstream.

When a lamb is born, its rumen and reticulum are not yet functional. As a result, a lamb cannot digest the food that an older sheep can eat. A lamb must drink its mother's milk to get the nutrition and antibodies needed to grow. As the newborn lamb gets older, it will nibble on solid food (hay, grass, and grain). This “nibbling” begins the development process of the young lamb's rumen. As the lamb grows, its rumen and reticulum become functional, and it can start to eat with the older sheep. It is during this process that the shepherd must carefully watch over the lambs to make sure they have the proper foods to grow. A lamb will die without milk and nibble food.

The Bible does not inform us how long Peter was allowed to ponder Jesus' response before Jesus asked Peter another question. Verse 16 tells us that Jesus asked Peter again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Notice that this time Jesus did not include the phrase “more than these.” It was simply, “do you **agape** me?” Instead of pointing at the fish and asking Peter if he loves Him more than them, He is now (figuratively) pointing at Himself. Peter, do you **agape** Me?

What was Peter's response? He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Once again, Peter did not use the word **agape** in his response. Once again, he used the word **phileo**. “Yes, Lord; You know that I **phileo** You.” Peter said, “Yes, Lord; You know that I am your friend,” for the second time.

Jesus again responded with something that Peter was probably not ready for: He said to him, “Tend My sheep.” Let's take a look at what Jesus said to Peter. The word “tend” is the Greek word “poimaino - ποιμαίνω” which means to be a

shepherd.³ What does it mean to be a shepherd? A shepherd watches over, leads, feeds, guides, cares for and defends the sheep. People who have been Christians for a while or are mature in faith could be considered sheep. Jesus told Peter to watch over, feed, guide, care for, and defend (protect and guard) His sheep. From another perspective, I would call those five things (watch over, lead, feed, care for, and defend); discipleship. Jesus was essentially telling Peter to disciple his sheep.

A person who has just become a Christian by accepting Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior could be considered a "lamb." Additionally, Christians who are mature in the faith could be considered "sheep." This difference begs the question of how a Christian "lamb" becomes a "sheep." To be a "sheep" Christian is to have a mature relationship with Christ, a relationship in which we trust, worship, and obey Him. The most important thing a lamb can do is eat the right food. Reading the Bible, attending Bible studies, and attending church blend for a good diet that causes lambs to grow into sheep. Study the Scriptures more deeply and regularly to get the "nutrition" you need as a Christian to grow into maturity in Christ.

Leading sheep is an easily misunderstood concept. There are two basic types of leaders: the shepherd who leads by example and asks his flock to follow his lead, and the dictator who drives his flock from the rear, barking like a sheepdog. A flock of sheep will follow a shepherd that they trust. However, sheep will also go where the master wants using sheepdogs that bark and nip at their legs. Both types of leaders are effective, but both are not beneficial to the sheep. When sheep follow the shepherd, there is little stress. When a dictator drives sheep, there is much stress.

The shepherd must ensure the shearing of the sheep every spring. Shearing removes the heavy coat of wool that protected the sheep against the cold of winter. That same heavy wool coat might cause a sheep to die of heat exhaustion in the summer. Christians are the same way. The spiritual growth that saw us through the winter of life will not sustain us in the summer. We need to start the spiritual "re-growth" again. God shears that off comfort zone and puts us into new situations that force us to grow.

Defending sheep is more than just protecting them from predators. A shepherd needs to keep "evil" animals (those that prey on sheep) away from the sheep; however, there are other "evils" from which sheep need to be protected. A shepherd that does not take care of his flock will kill it just as surely as wolves or wild dogs. A shepherd must also protect the flock's weak, injured, and sick. The shepherd must care about his sheep for any of this to happen. Now back to our story.

The third time that Jesus asked Peter the question, something different happened. The question changed. Let's take a look at verse 17. [He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"](#) The question may look the same, but it is not. This time, Jesus did *not* use the word **agape**; instead, he used **phileo**. [Peter, do you](#)

³ Ibid. vol. 4., 81.

phileo me? In modern vernacular, this would read: Peter, are you really my friend? Ouch! It is no wonder that the Bible records Peter's reaction as grief. Peter's sorrow was because Jesus no longer asked if he loved Him, but was instead questioning his friendship.

In his grief (and I think some panic), Peter responded, "Lord, You know everything; you know that I love You." For the third time, Peter used the word **phileo** instead of **agape**. "You know that I **phileo** You." This time Peter appealed to the omniscience of Jesus by reminding Him that He knew all things. He was essentially asking, "Jesus, how can you ask if I am really your friend? You know everything, so you know that I am your friend." I think that Peter may have been hoping for an affirmative response. Rather than affirm Peter's friendship, Jesus told him how to prove his love: "Feed My sheep."

Let's look at what Jesus' third response was saying to Peter. The word "feed" is the Greek word "bosko – βόσκω" being used again, which you will remember is used to portray the image of sheep grazing (feeding) in a pasture. This time Jesus is telling Peter to watch over the adult sheep (instead of young lambs) while they graze in the field. This request begs the question: How do sheep graze?

In 18th century America, cattle ranchers and shepherders declared war on each other. The problem was that when the sheep grazed, they ate the grass and plants down to the soil, destroying all plant life in the area. Sheep will eat all plant life in a field if not kept constantly moving, which they were not. When the cattle ranchers came along, there was no plant life left for the cattle to eat because the sheep had eaten everything. The shepherds of 18th century America did not know how to be good shepherds. Sheep must be moved from pasture to pasture before they completely devour the plants to prevent the destruction of the grass. The grass and plant life need to grow constantly, so the sheep have a steady food source. The wrong food will also kill a sheep: a shepherd must protect (prevent) the sheep from eating deadly weeds. However, if there are plenty of suitable plants for sheep, they will not eat the weeds that could harm them.

The shepherd needs to keep moving the sheep to new pastures because if he does not, the sheep will wander off searching for fresh food. If a sheep has gone missing, it is typically because it is hungry and not being fed. Many churches have dwindling numbers because the sheep are not being fed and are wandering away to find new pastures. As Christians who are discipling others, it is our responsibility to keep Jesus' flock fed. We cannot force-feed his flock; or be the "do as I say, not as I do" type of leader. That is just like giving sheep moldy hay to eat or stagnant water to drink. The effect is the same; the sheep will die or leave to find better food.

Jesus told Peter to be a good shepherd: keep the sheep moving, and don't let them destroy a pasture. What would happen if Jesus' sheep (his church) were not kept moving and ran out of food? They would die of starvation. Have you ever been in a church filled with dead sheep? Perhaps those sheep have been in the same pasture too

long, and all the food is gone.

Interestingly, Cornell University recommends not keeping sheep in the same pasture or field for more than two days. By day three, most of the nutritious food will be gone.⁴ As Christians, we need to daily “graze” on the word of God by reading our Bibles and meditating (ponder or think about) what we read.

Matthew 28:19-20 contains the great commission. Jesus told us to make disciples. If you remember, I referred to discipleship as watching over, leading, feeding, guiding, caring for, and defending the sheep. Discipleship is a full-time job, or it should be if we take the Great Commission seriously. We often think that it is the Pastor's job to make disciples, but it is not. It is the sheep that reproduce and thereby produce more sheep. After you lead someone to Christ, do you abandon that person or hand them off to the Pastor? No, you don't. After you lead someone to Christ, you begin to disciple that person. After they mature, they will reproduce and begin to disciple, and so on and so forth.

Essentially this means that Christians have a dual role. We must be sheep, and at the same time, we must be shepherds. We must be sheep following after Jesus, the Good Shepherd. We must also be shepherds involved in the discipleship of other sheep. It is the infinity loop of the gospel. We are always flowing from disciplining others to being disciplined. We are both shepherds and sheep. We are ever-flowing back and forth between the two roles. The diagram below demonstrates the disciplining flow.



What if Jesus asked you the same question that he asked Peter? **Do you love me more than these?** What would Jesus point at in your life? Would he point at your spouse, your children, your money (or the desire for it), your job, or ____ (you fill in the blank)? If Jesus came up to you and asked if you loved him more than these, how would you respond? Be honest with yourself. Perhaps you would react like Peter (in a similar manner and say): "No Lord, I don't love you more than these, but I am your friend." If we were brutally honest with ourselves, that is precisely how we would

⁴ Kelsie Raucher, 2018. *Rotational Grazing: How Often Should I Rotate?* - Cornell Small Farms. [online] Cornell College of Agriculture and Sciences. Available at: <https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2018/10/rotational-grazing-how-often-should-i-rotate/>.

answer that question. If that was your answer, don't condemn yourself. After all, Jesus did not rebuke Peter for his answers. Instead, Jesus showed Peter how that answer could be changed, and in those verses, he did the same for you.

Do you want your relationship with Jesus to change from friendship to love? Is your relationship with Jesus a **phileo** relationship or an **agape** relationship? What type of relationship do you want it to be? Peter's relationship changed from **phileo** to **agape**, and so can yours. Peter learned to do what Jesus told him to. 1 Peter 2: 2-3 says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

Let's look at these verses and compare them to Jesus's instructions to Peter. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk (feed my lambs). Peter learned to give newborn Christians the "milk" of the gospel, and so can you. What is the "milk" of the gospel? Hebrews 6:1-3 says, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits." The "milk" of the gospel are teachings about repentance, faith, rituals, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. These are the things that "babes" (lambs) in Christ need to know. First, they have to digest this biblical milk and spiritually grow. Then they will be ready to eat sheep food.

The second half of 1 Peter 2:2-3 states, "... that by it you may grow up into salvation" (shepherd my sheep). In Jesus' second instruction, Peter learned how to be a shepherd, and so can you. He learned how to watch over, feed, guide, care for and defend His sheep. These actions allow the sheep to grow up. How did Peter help his sheep to grow? 1 Peter 2:11-17 says, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." By doing these things, the lambs matured and became adult sheep. These instructions are part of discipleship.

The third part of 1 Peter 2: 2-3 states, "... if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." (feed my sheep). You will remember that Jesus' third instruction to Peter was to feed (provide food), or graze, the sheep. Peter learned how to feed and care for adult sheep, and so can you. When Peter's Christian "lambs" were ready for solid food, he led them into pastures of mature Christian teachings. At this point, the sheep were ready to

learn about becoming holy, Christ-like, and developing the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. I will warn you that to feed adult sheep, you must be eating and digesting "adult" food. You must have matured in the faith or be well on your way before you can disciple in the "solid food" of the gospel.

If you are in despair right now, do not worry. Peter did not become a mature Christian overnight. Neither did the Apostle Paul. It took them years to become mature Christians. Growing in Christ takes time, so don't be afraid to give yourself that time. Remember this as you disciple others. Just as it took time for you to grow (and are still growing) spiritually, it will take time for the Christians you are discipling to grow. Growing in Christ is a lifetime endeavor. We will never stop growing in Christ. So please don't give up. Keep growing in Christ.

Here are my final questions for you. Will you tend (feed) Christ's lambs? Will you shepherd (disciple) Christ's sheep? Will you feed Christ's sheep? Are you willing to affirm your love for Jesus by tending his lambs, shepherding his sheep, and feeding his sheep? These questions were not easy for Peter to answer, and they may not be easy for you to answer. But, ultimately, Peter would respond yes to each of the questions. The Holy Spirit provided the power for Peter to do these things. I do not doubt that the Holy Spirit will do the same for you. [Do you love Jesus more than these?](#)