

Introduction: If Jesus Truly...

“If Jesus truly died for my sins.” “If Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead.” “If Jesus is truly the Lord God, then what am I to do with these ‘trulys’ especially after I blew it big time.” Peter’s introspection is interrupted by a familiar voice emanating from the shoreline, “Come to shore for breakfast” (John 21:5). “If it’s free it’s me” Peter says, so, he puts on his clothes and does a belly smacker into Sea of Tiberias. He then swims 100 yards to be the first to partake of some freshly grilled fish and homemade bread. The rest of the rag-tag team of ambivalent disciples show up a few moments later wondering why Peter is making such an embarrassing spectacle of himself.

The Peter Profile

Bombastic and bold characterizes Peter. He, along with his brother Andrew, were the first disciples. When they first met Jesus, immediately changed his name to Cephas, i.e., “Rock.” He was not only one of the core disciples, but he was the de facto leader of the group. He was one of the privileged few, along with James and John, to be with Jesus when Jesus was “transformed before them” on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1). Moreover, he was the first to recognize Jesus’ identity and then proclaim it with two mammoth confessions:

You are the Christ the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16).
You are the Holy One of God (John 6:69).

Peter was the one Jesus encouraged to walk on water, and he did, for a split second. He promised to defend Jesus to the death and almost accomplished that feat when he cut off Malchus’ ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. If Jesus hadn’t performed a super quick miracle and reattached that ear, Peter would have been executed on the spot. Twice he tried to prevent Jesus from going to the Cross compelling Jesus call him “Satan” (Matthew 16:23). When Jesus wanted to wash his feet at the “Last Supper” Peter initially objected and sarcastically recommended that Jesus wash his entire body. When the heat was on at Jesus’ trial the big, bad, Peter denied him thrice before the intimidating presence of a little girl. Denying you even know your best friend when he needs you the most puts a big Matza ball size dent in the relationship. So, when Peter hears Jesus’ invitation for breakfast, he gets there quicker than an overcaffeinated origami artist.

After Peter polishes off some breakfast, Jesus, the One who died to reconcile the world back to his Father, begins the reconciliation process with one of his closest friends. He commences the conversation in John 21:15-17-

15 Jesus said “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.” 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, “Feed my sheep.” 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.

Once, Twice, Three Times A...Reconciliation

“Peter, do you love me?” Before we do a deep dive into this mother-of-all-questions, we need to mention that this is the first time Jesus directly asks someone if s/he loves him. Before the

resurrection, Jesus continually directed people to love his heavenly Father. Afterward, Jesus is substantiated as the Son of God and God the Son. Therefore, the Great Commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God” now properly includes him. So, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me” but then, attaches a qualifier, “More than these?” No one is knock-down sure what is the subject(s) of “more than these.” However, since Peter immediately reverted to his former career as a fisherman as soon as Jesus was seemingly out of the picture, and encouraged his colleagues to do likewise, we have a few interpretive options:

Peter, do you love me more than you love the other disciples? Do you love me more than the other disciples love me?
Do you love me more than your career? Do you love me more than everything else?

The ancient way of driving home a point was to thrice repeat it. For instance, in Isaiah 6, the six-wing seraphim emphasize the utter and sheer holiness of God by singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” So, Jesus asks Peter three times in rapid succession, “Do You Love me?” Although Peter answered affirmatively the first time, “Yes Lord, I love you” Jesus keeps pressing the question, not because he’s hard of hearing, but to help Peter heal over each of his relationship severing denials.

We are told however, that Peter is “grieved” by this impromptu inquisition and who wouldn’t be? We all say we love God but if he asked us that question multiple times we too might be upset. Perhaps Peter is still saddened by his failure to carry out of his previous promise, “Even though I must die with you, I will never deny you” (Matthew 26:35). Or perhaps he was being haunted by Jesus’ previous warning, “Whoever denies me before people, I also will deny them before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:33). Perhaps, he thought Jesus was done with him, that he’d screwed up one too many times and the three denials were the last straws that broke the camel’s back. Even before the day of denial, Peter always over promised and under delivered but now he only demurs, “Lord, you know all, and you know that I love you” (v17).

Dying Love

Jesus does know all and knows that Peter loves him despite his repeated failures and gargantuan character flaws (hope for all of us). Once convinced of Peter’s imperfect love for him, Jesus calls him thrice to feed his “sheep and lambs.” This “calling” is not only for Peter to teach God’s people God’s Word but it’s also Jesus putting his trust back into a broken and battered soul. After the reconciliation is complete, Jesus utters a cryptic prophecy to Peter

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 this he said to him, "Follow me."

There is much to unpack in this “martyrdom” passage but for now we can only repeat the legend that Peter was crucified upside down, by his request, because he felt entirely unworthy of dying in the same manner as Jesus did. This unprecedented act reminds us of his undying love for his Lord.

Conclusion: Loving the Greatest Love of All

Since Jesus truly died for our sins. Since Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead. Since Jesus truly is our Lord and God, then we, like Peter, must allow these “trulys” to deeply impact our lives.

Christianity is unique among the world religions in that we don't just believe in God, fear God, confess God, or worship God. We love God and it's only when we love him enough to die for him that we will love him enough to live for him. And not just to love him partially or *poketo*, but fully and wholly, with all that we are and all that we have.

Contra the late Whitney Houston, the greatest love of all is not "learning how to love yourself," but to love the greatest Love, i.e., Jesus. That love produces the greatest joy (and expands the soul's capacity to love others). Conversely, the greatest sin is not to love the greatest Love or to love something more than him. Loving lesser loves produces the greatest misery. Therefore, let us be extremely intentional in growing in our love for God. That intentionality starts now by prayerfully singing the old classic, "My Jesus, I Love Thee."