

Sunday, July 1, 2018

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

As we approach America’s Independence Day on July 4, we will be hearing a lot of talk about “freedom.” I looked up the word “freedom” and there are 17 separate definitions. Here is a relevant sampling:

- “exemption from external control, interference, regulation, etc.”
- “the power to determine action without restraint”
- “personal liberty, as opposed to bondage or slavery”
- “exemption from the presence of anything specified (usually followed by *from*)”
- “the absence of or release from ties, obligations, etc.”

These are good definitions to describe how the vast majority of people in this country view the freedom they think they have. They don’t want to be hindered or restrained in their sins. They don’t want to feel obligated to obey God. They believe that they are free to sin as they please, and that they should be free from having to listen to anyone telling them otherwise. They believe that they are autonomous creatures, exempt from the sovereign rule of the King of kings. It’s a good time to recall, as we approach Independence Day, that they are slaves of sin. They aren’t free.

“Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.” (John 8:34)

The Greek word translated “servant” there is “doulos.” The word means “slave.” They are slaves of sin. They’re under the bondage of sin. They can only sin. They are incapable of doing righteousness. Yet they fancy themselves to be “free.” They boast of their “freedom.” “This is the land of the free,” they say.

Please note that I’m not just talking about non-Christian people (and I use the term “Christian” very loosely). This delusion is in the warp and woof of almost every one of the so-called “churches” that dot the landscape across this country. Churches have become so interested in catering to sinners that they’re afraid to even talk about sin. They have a variety of activities and entertaining features (e.g., potluck dinners, light shows, beautiful architecture, “contemporary worship services” that consist primarily of musical entertainment, Vacation Bible Schools), but there’s no talk of holiness or sanctification. They don’t want to offend anyone. They want to hide behind a false interpretation of “judge not,” and in a perversion

that's almost beyond comprehension, they're afraid they will "turn people away from Jesus" if they tell them to turn away from their sins. They want to talk about the grace of God, but they don't want to mention that this same grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (Titus 2:11-12). They want to tell you that Jesus will give you freedom, but the freedom He gives you is the freedom from having to follow His commandments – He already paid the price, and He already lived a righteous life that's credited to your account, they say, so it doesn't matter what you do now. He fulfilled the moral law on your behalf, they say, so you are allowed to break it with impunity. (This is a heresy that has been around for a long time called "Antinomianism.")

When Jesus said, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36), He didn't mean that you're free to go off and sin. He didn't mean you're allowed to go and do whatever you want to do now. He did say, after all, "Go and sin no more." It means that we're now free from the dominion of sin. We're now free to worship and serve and glorify God. We're free to obey God for the right reason (i.e., because we love Him). Like the servant in Exodus 21, we're now free to become the willing slaves of Christ and of righteousness. This is why the apostles continuously identified themselves as the servants (doulos) of Jesus Christ. And the following describes the state of things in the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ:

"For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things *is* death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:20-23)

False churches, however, are filled with congregations of people who are still slaves of sin. And standing at the helm are more slaves of sin (usually, I might note, of the female or effeminate male persuasion):

"For when they speak great swelling *words* of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, *through much wantonness*, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage." (2 Peter 2:18-19)

If that isn't a description of these lightweights that stand in the pulpits today, I don't know what is.

The bottom line is, a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ is made up of redeemed and sanctified people who obey the commandments of God. And what is their motivation for obeying His commandments? Love. They love God. If you're following the commandments of God for any other reason than your love for God, then you're doing it for the wrong reason. It's not so you can work your way to heaven or try to get your good works to outweigh your bad works – all that does it make you a part of every other false religion on earth. It's not so you can begrudgingly put a show on and do the absolute minimum that you think is required – all that does is make you an insincere, lying manpleaser who doesn't care about God. It's not because it makes you feel good to help other people – all that does is make you just like every other God-hating do-gooder who likes to boast of how charitable he is to others. What I'm talking about is a loving obedience. And the standard is that you love God with every faculty of your being; you love Him more than anything else; and if you love Him, you obey Him.

“Master, which *is* the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:37-38)

“If ye love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)

And of course, we are all absolute failures at following those standards acceptably. If there was ever a thing to show you how lost you would be without the blood of Christ, it's that you realize that the whole law of God can be distilled down into two commandments, and you can't even follow those. You can't keep two commandments like you should!

So we're going to talk a little bit today about loving God. Love for God has always been the primary distinguishing characteristic of the saints of God. When Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to “love the Lord thy God, etc.” He was referring back to a section of the Old Testament known as the “Shema” which begins with Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

It's called the "Shema" because the first word in the text translated as "hear" is the Hebrew word "shema." To this day, the more traditional and religious Jews will, in their typical, rote fashion, recite these words twice every day – once in the morning, and once in the evening. They traditionally do it with their right hand covering their eyes, and it is traditionally the last words they say before death. Talk about "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me!" (Matthew 15:8).

If you ask most people the question "do you love God?", they're going to say, "of course I love God," and they're going to be insulted that you would even dare to ask such an impertinent question. But this commandment isn't just to have some sappy feeling toward whatever your idea of "God" happens to be – this is a love of action. Repeatedly in Deuteronomy, Moses insists that the way that you show your love for God is by obeying His commandments:

"And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)

We see similar language in Joshua:

"But take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law, which Moses the servant of the LORD charged you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cleave unto him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." (Joshua 22:5)

In their great prayers to God, Daniel and Nehemiah address God in almost verbatim language as follows:

"And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments." (Daniel 9:4)

**"And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments."
(Nehemiah 1:5)**

Then in the New Testament, we find no shortage of verses about our duty to love God.

“But if any man love God, the same is known of him... If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.” (1 Corinthians 8:3, 16:22)

2 Corinthians 5:14 teaches us that “the love of Christ constraineth us,” meaning that the motivating force behind our service to Christ is our love for Him. And the night before He was crucified, Christ said:

**“He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.”
(John 14:21)**

I could go on and on with examples, but suffice it to say, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the one requirement of God is that you love Him with every fiber of your being! Everything else is built on top of that. We don’t follow His commandments just for the sake of following His commandments – we follow His commandments because He has given us a new heart to love Him. We don’t deny ourselves, take up our crosses, lose our lives, and follow Him because it’s the convenient thing to do – we do it because we love Him. We aren’t willing to give up every worldly possession and earthly relationship for Him because it’s so agreeable to the flesh – we do it because we love Him. Being a disciple of Christ is not a cheap thing to do. It requires sacrifice and obedience. But it is a joyous thing to do – His yoke is easy and His burden is light, and His commandments are not grievous...because we love Him.

I’d like to focus a little bit on John 21, the last chapter of John, regarding the restoration of Peter:

“So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what *shall* this man *do*? Jesus saith unto him, If I

will that he tarry till I come, what *is that* to thee? follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, if I will that he tarry till I come, what *is that* to thee?" (John 21:15-23)

Now, I love Peter, because I can relate to Peter in a lot of ways, as I'm sure you can. Peter did foolish, brash things. He was impetuous. He overestimated his faith and his love for the Lord, and he underestimated his weaknesses. He spoke selfish, carnal words, such that Christ said to him, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." (Matthew 16:23). He behaved in a cowardly fashion and denied Christ. I say, I can relate to Peter in most if not all of these things, and I take comfort in the fact that the Lord didn't cast him away. So, we find Peter here in John 21 in an ashamed, dejected state, and the Lord Jesus zeros in on the all-important question of "do you love me?" And that's always the question, isn't it? Do you or do you not love the Lord Jesus? Do you really love Him? We can learn a lot of good stuff from this passage, but let's set the stage. The apostles were in Galilee, apparently waiting for the resurrected Christ to meet them, as they had been previously told (see Matthew 26:32; 28:7, 10 & 16). They had decided to go fishing, when Christ appeared to them:

"After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he [himself]. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the [sons] of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt [his] fisher's coat [unto him], (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught. Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, Come [and] dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead." (John 21:1-14)

The scripture doesn't tell us why those guys went fishing. It could be that they didn't want to sit idle as they awaited the Savior, so they were making good use of the time. It could be that they had grown impatient. It could be that after having forsaken Christ and having fled from the Garden of Gethsemane, they felt guilty and unworthy to serve Him, so they were toying with the idea of returning to their old occupation. Whatever the case, they went back to the nets that they had forsaken 3 ½ years earlier. Remember, "they straightway left *their* nets, and followed him." (Matthew 4:20). And you'll see that in their endeavor, they failed. They tried all night and caught nothing. But when the sovereign God arrived on the scene, they had superabounding success.

Now, we all remember Peter's cocky attitude about how great his faith and boldness was, and his subsequent denial of Christ. I think it's important to look at this.

"Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples." (Matthew 26:33-35)

"But Peter said unto him, Although all shall be offended, yet *will* not I. And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this day, *even* in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. But he spake the more vehemently, If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise. Likewise also said they all." (Mark 14:29-31)

"And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me." (Luke 22:33-34)

"Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice." (John 13:37-38)

And then just a few hours later, Peter fled and denied Christ three times, just as Christ told him he would.

Now, back to John 21, we're here with Christ and the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. It is the third time now that Christ has appeared to them since His resurrection. And from what's recorded in scripture, to this point, the Lord Jesus hasn't said one word to Peter about those denials. For Peter, that has to feel awkward. You know he's under a burden of tremendous guilt for doing that, and it's just hanging out there in the air, unresolved. Jesus could have

upbraided him about it. But instead He kindly fed him breakfast, and then cut right to the heart of the matter and said, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” For any disciple of Christ that has gone astray, that is the question. You don’t have to go set up a multi-month series of appointments with someone from the American Association of Christian Counselors to discuss your feelings and shortcomings. The question is, do you love the Lord Jesus Christ more than anything else?

In this exchange between Christ and Peter, there are a few very interesting nuances in the Greek that you don’t see in the English translation, so I will lay that out here:

Christ: **Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest [agapao] thou me more than these?**

Peter: **Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love [phileo] thee.**

Christ: **Feed [bosko] my lambs [arnion].**

Christ: **Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest [agapao] thou me?**

Peter: **Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love [phileo] thee.**

Christ: **Feed [poimaino] my sheep [probaton].**

Christ: **Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest [phileo] thou me?**

Peter: **Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love [phileo] thee.**

Christ: **Feed [bosko] my sheep [probaton].**

Here are several observations from this little dialogue:

- Jesus calls Peter “Simon, son of Jonas” rather than “Peter” or “Cephas.” If we look back in John 1:42, we find this: “And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.” (See also Matthew 16:18). The name “Peter” or “Cephas” means “stone” and represents a firm, steady, solid character. Jesus calls him by his old name here, as a reminder that he hasn’t been acting like a “Peter” or a “Cephas.”
- There are two separate words here that we translate into English as “love” – agapao and phileo. Whenever you have two distinct words used in the same context that are very close in meaning and can even be used synonymously in some cases, we have to assume that there is a reason for it. Here, “agapao” is talking about the highest form of love; the type of love where you will sacrifice everything; the type of love that permeates your life and is the spring of all of your actions; the type of love that we’re SUPPOSED to love God with. Here, “phileo” is more of a brotherly love or affection, which doesn’t reach to the same heights as “agapao.”

- Jesus asks the question three times, just as Peter had denied Jesus three times. Peter must have connected the two together.
- The first two times that Jesus asks the question, He uses the “agapao” form of the word. All three times, Peter responds with the “phileo” form of the word. Peter is feeling guilty and humbled and knows that after all of his previous bravado, he can’t answer truthfully with “agapao” so he drops it down to a lower form of love. As if Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me?” And Peter responded by saying, “You know that I have a great affection for you.”
- Each time Jesus asks the question, He brings it down a notch. First, it’s “do you love (agapao) me more than these?” Then it’s just, “do you love (agapao) me?” And finally, “do you love (phileo) me?” As much as to say, “Do you have this agapao type of love towards me to the exclusion of all other things? Do you love me more than these ships and nets that you just toiled all night with?” Or perhaps, “Do you still believe you love me more than these other disciples?” Then, “Do you have this agapao type of love towards me at all?” And finally, “Do you even have this phileo type of love towards me that you say you have?” Peter was so grieved not only because the Lord had asked three times, but because on the third time, He drops down from “agapao” to “phileo” and questions even that level of love.
- Each time Peter answers, he appeals to Christ’s omniscience. He is saying, “Lord, you know I love you; you know that my love for you isn’t perfect and what it ought to be, and that I’ve sinned and behaved in a manner that’s unworthy of someone who loves you, but my love for you is there and it’s sincere.” It’s comforting to know that the Lord is omniscient and can cut through all of our foolishness to know if our love for Him is sincere.
- There are two different words used here that we translate into English as “feed” – bosko and poimaino. These are very similar words, but the word “bosko” refers more to “providing nutrition” and is related to pasturing, foddering, or grazing. The sheep of God are fed with the Word of God. On the other hand, “poimaino” includes all of the jobs of a shepherd and has the idea of tending or shepherding, which includes not only feeding, but protecting and guiding and all of the other functions of a shepherd. The idea is that he’s telling Peter not only to give them the Word of God as food for their souls, but to tend to them.

- There is also a distinction made here between “lambs” and “sheep” (Greek words “arnion” and “probaton”). “Lambs” refers particularly to those young in the faith, those tender and weak sheep. “Sheep” refers to the whole flock.
- Finally, He calls them MY lambs and MY sheep. Let’s always remember that, shall we? – these are God’s sheep. “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:14, 27). He is the Good Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd, but He has entrusted the most precious thing on earth to Him – His sheep, who have been in His heart from eternity past (see Ephesians 1) – to someone with an imperfect, yet sincere love for Him.

To wrap things up in John 21, here’s how it ends regarding Peter:

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.” (John 21:18-22)

We have a prophecy of the death of Peter, which at this point would have (or at least should have) been a great encouragement to him. At Christ’s death, Peter’s faith had failed, and he denied Christ. Christ is telling him that at his own death, he won’t go looking for it, he won’t be trying to make it happen, but it will happen, and when it does happen, he will sacrifice his life for the cause of Christ and it will glorify God – in other words, his faith will not fail again. But Peter’s still a little bit intractable. Jesus tells him to “Follow me.” And what does Peter do? He turns around. Yes - he turns around. He doesn’t take one step to follow Christ, but instead turns around, looks at John, and says, “what about this guy? You’re telling me that I’m going to die, but what about him?” Jesus says, “Whatever I have planned for John is none of your business. If I decide that he’s going to live until the second coming, what is that to you? I told you to follow me. Don’t worry about John.”

So we see here in this short section the major elements of what it takes to be a true follower of Christ: love, sacrifice, and obedience, with love of Him being the foundation.

I love you. Amen.