

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

“DO I LOVE THE LORD OR NO?”

A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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“Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me?”—John xxi. 17.

THIS is a pointed question, which demands a personal answer and should, therefore, stir up full and frequent self-examination. “Lovest thou me?” It is a probing question that is likely to excite much grief when pressed home to the sensitive, tender-hearted disciple, even as Peter was grieved because the Lord said unto him the third time, “Lovest thou me?” Yet it is a pleasing and profitable question to so many of us as can give a like solemn and satisfactory response to that of Simon Peter, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”

I. IT IS VERY NECESSARY THAT ALL DISCIPLES, EVEN THE MOST PRIVILEGED, THE MOST TALENTED, AND THE MOST FAMOUS, SHOULD OFTEN BE ASKED THE QUESTION, HEAR IT IN THEIR SOULS, AND FEEL ITS THRILLING INTENSITY, “SIMON, SON OF JONAS, LOVEST THOU ME?”

It must have been momentous indeed, or the Saviour would not have repeated it to Peter three times at one interview. He tarried on earth but forty days after his resurrection. These opportunities

for conference, therefore, with his disciples would be few. On what subjects, then, should he speak to them but those which appeared to him of the weightiest import? Of the times or the seasons that must presently transpire, he refrains to divulge a secret. With the fulfilment of ancient predictions that prompted the curiosity of the Jew, or the solution of metaphysical problems that harassed the minds of Gentile philosophers, he did not meddle. I neither find him interpreting obscure prophecy, nor expounding mystic doctrine; but instead thereof I do find him inculcating personal piety. The question he propounds is of such vital importance that all other questions may be set aside till this one question is positively settled, "Lovest thou me?"

Hence, beloved, I infer that it is *of infinitely more consequence* for me to know that I love Christ than it is to know the meaning of the little horn, or the ten toes, or the four great beasts. All Scripture is profitable to those who have grace to profit by it; but wouldest thou both save thyself and them that hear thee, thou must know him and love him to whom patriarchs, prophets, and apostles all bear witness that there is salvation in none other, and no other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. You may whet your appetite for logic, but you cannot with your heart believe unto righteousness while you occupy your thoughts, your tongues, or your pens wrangling about Calvinism and Arminianism, sublapsarianism and supra-lapsarianism, or any of the endless controversies of the schoolmen and sectarians! "Lovest thou me?" that is the moot point. Canst thou give an affirmative answer? Will thy conscience, thy life, thy God, attest the verity of thy love to him? then, though thou be no doctor of divinity, though thou canst not decipher the niceties of systematic theology, though thou art unable to rebut one in a thousand of the subtleties of the adversary, yet thou hast an unction from the Holy One; thy love approves thee; thy faith has saved thee; and he whom thy soul loveth will keep thee; for time and for eternity thou art blessed. To my mind, I say, the gravity of the question is palpable from the time at which it was put. During the few days of our risen Lord's sojourn, he would not have given it such distinct prominence had it not been in Peter's case the evidence of his repentance, his restoration, and the full recognition he received.

But, brethren, what question can more *closely appeal to ourselves*, to each one of us? Love is one of the most vital of the Christian graces. If faith be the eye of the soul, without which we cannot see our Lord savingly, surely love is the very heart of the soul, and there is no spiritual life if love be absent. I will not say that love is the first grace, for faith first discovers that Christ loves us, and then we love him because he first loved us. Love may be second in order, but it is not second in importance. I may say of faith and love, that these are like two roes that are twins; or rather of faith, and hope, and love, that these are three divine sisters, who

mutually support one another; the health of one betokening the vigour of all, or the decline in one the weakness of all. "Lovest thou me?" Why, the question means, Are you a Christian? Are you a disciple? Are you saved? For if any man love wife, or child, or house more than Christ, he is not worthy of him. Christ must have from every one of his disciples the heart's warmest affection, and where that is not freely accorded, depend upon it, there is no true faith, and consequently no salvation, no spiritual life. On thine answer to that question hangs thy present state. Dost thou love Jesus? If the verdict be "No," then thou art still in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity. But if the truthful answer of thy soul be, "Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee," then, weak as thou art, thou art a saved soul, and with all thy mourning and trembling, thy doubts and misgivings, the Spirit of God bears witness with thy spirit that thou art born from above. The sincerity of your love to Christ shows more plainly than aught beside the verity of your relation to him.

Oh! what *searching of heart* this question demands! Do not flatter yourselves with any false confidence. Many persons have been deceived upon this matter. Alas! they are partial judges, who sit in judgment of themselves; for every defect they have an excuse; they find mitigating circumstances to palliate their basest crimes. No marvel to me, but infinite pity for them that they choose their own delusions and become the dupes of their own infatuation. Their feelings, enhanced by the music of a hymn, or impassioned by the fervour of a sermon, they mistake for an inspiration of faith and love; and when the emotions pass off, as they quickly do, they grow loud in their professions. At first their own hearts were deceived; at length they practise deception on others. O ye church members! I beseech you, do not conclude that you are members of the invisible Church because you are members of the visible Church. Though your names may be inscribed on the roll of the faithful here, do not be too sure that they are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Never take your position before God for granted. Do not shrink from a rigid scrutiny as those who never dare ask the question; do not disparage self-examination like those who affect to think it is the devil sets them to the task when he would beset them with legal terrors. Believe me, Satan is too fond of lulling you into presumption to aid or abet in awakening you to make sure of your condition. There is a gross infatuation which is the counterfeit of faith in God. Its credulous victims believe a lie, and fondly they cling to it like limpets to a rock. But sound believers are not afraid of vigilant self-examination; they are prepared to endure a severer test; they say, "Search me, O God, and try me." It is your hollow dissemblers who resent all questionings, and take umbrage at any suspicions. The man who knows that he has pure gold to sell is not afraid of the aquafortis with which the goldsmith tests it, nor even of the crucible into

which he may cast it. Not so the impostor who hawks a baser metal; he entreats you to be satisfied with his warranty, though it is as worthless as his wares; search yourselves; examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves; know ye not that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" By yonder wreck, cast away upon the rocks of presumption; by the cries of souls who, concerning faith, have made shipwreck, while they dreamed they were sailing gloriously into harbour—I beseech you make sure work for eternity, and take care that your answer to the question, "Lovest thou me?" is well weighed, truthful, and sincere, lest you should split on the same reefs and be lost, for ever lost!

And, dear friends, I am sure the more closely we examine ourselves, the more *need for self-examination* we shall discover. Can you not recollect much in the tone of your thoughts and the temper of your actions that might well lead you to suspect that you do not love Christ? If this be not so with all of you, I know it is so with me. Mournfully must I confess that when I look back upon my past service for my Master, I could wish to blot it out with tears of penitent compunction, so far as my share in it has been concerned. Wherein he hath used me let him have all the glory, for to him it belongs. His be the praise. For me there remaineth shame and confusion of face, because of the coldness of my heart, the feebleness of my faith, the presumption with which I have trusted to my own understanding, and the resistance I have offered to the motions of the Holy Spirit. Alas for the carnality of our minds, the worldliness of our projects, and our forgetfulness of God in times of ease. It is strange to me if we have not all cause to mourn over delinquencies like these. And if it be so with those of us who still can honestly say that we know we love our Lord, what scruples, what perilous scruples might some of you entertain whose conduct, character, and the tenor of your lives may well raise a graver question! You imagine that you love Christ. Have you fed his lambs? Have you fed his sheep? Have you given that proof which our Saviour imperatively requires of you? What are you doing for him now? It is poor love that spends itself in professions and never comes to any practical result. Let this enquiry, then, pass round:—

"What have I done for him who died
To save my precious soul?"

Alas! then, if instead of having, like the beloved Persis, laboured much in the Lord (Rom. xvi. 12), might we not, some of us, suspect ourselves of having so acted as rather to dishonour his name? Are you not tenderly conscious that Christian people full often lend their sanction, by a loose conversation and lax habits, to the sins which the world has allowed and applauded? Jerusalem becomes a comforter to Sodom when those who call themselves people of God

conform to the usages of society, and of such society as is corrupt at the core. They say, "Ah! you see, there is no harm in it; for the saints themselves indulge in it. They are of the same mind as we are; they make a great pretence, but to no great purpose, for they do as we do." God forgive us if we have opened the mouths of the Lord's enemies after this fashion. Surely such failures and such offences make it necessary for us to ask whether we love the Lord or not. And though we may hesitate to answer the question, it is well to raise it, lest, closing our eyes in carnal security, we should go on to destruction. Let us put the question to ourselves again, and again, and again, for the question will not mar our faith, nor even mar our comfort, so long as we are able to fall back upon Peter's reply, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." And now, presuming that we are, all of us, convinced that the question is expedient and becoming, let me remark that:—

II. IT IS A QUESTION WHICH, WHEN RAISED, OFTEN CAUSES GRIEF.

Peter was "grieved," but the Lord Jesus Christ never grieved one of his disciples heedlessly. *This goes again to prove the need of the question.* He was rather for comforting, cheering, and blessing them. He inflicted no needless pain. He shielded them from bootless anxiety. Yet Peter was grieved. Now why should you and I be grieved when the enquiry turns upon our sincerity? You know that if we do not canvass the matter ourselves, our foes will be prompt enough to suspect us, especially if we are in a public position. The clearer your character the keener the assault. Satan—and he is the accuser of the brethren—said, "Doth Job serve God for nought? Hast thou not set a hedge about him?" The devil's taunting question has become a proverb with the profane. What worse can they say of the Christian minister than this, "Is he zealous for nought? Has he not a motive? Is there not selfishness in the background?" Base insinuations will, I suppose, be freely uttered about you whatever may be your position in the world. Of the tradesman who fears the Lord, they will say, "Of course, he makes it pay." As for the merchant who consecrates his wealth for the love of Christ, they ask, "Do not you see that he is seeking notoriety? Is it not a cheap way of getting up a name?" We are sure to have the question raised. Sometimes it sorely grieves us, because of our pride.

We do not like to have our feelings chafed in such a manner. I cannot help thinking there was some sin in Peter's grief. He was grieved as one who felt himself aggrieved—"Is it not too bad to ask me three times! Why should the Lord thus distress me? Surely the blessed Master might have put more confidence in me than to press a question which stings like a reproach." Yet what a poor simpleton he was to think so. How much harm comes from answering in a hurry. When our profession is canvassed, we ought not to be angry. Did we know our own hearts, we should

keenly feel the accusations it would be reasonable to lay against us, and the poor defence that conscience could make. When my enemies are finding fault with me, and forging lies to injure me, I sometimes think to myself that though I can exonerate myself from their charges, there are other faults of which they are not cognisant that humble me before God beyond their utmost surmise. Their conspiracies cannot explore the secret of my confessions when I lay the imaginations of my heart before him against whom only I have sinned. How dare we whisper into the ears of our fellow-men the wish, the whim the like, or the hate that haunts one's breast, or aught of the multitude of vanities that float along the rapid current of one's mind? What would they think of us who do not know how rightly to think of themselves? Surely *pride is put out of countenance*, for the worst opinions our enemies can form of us are probably as good as we dare to entertain of ourselves, taking the evil of our hearts into consideration. The heart is a very sink of evil; if we have not perceived it, we have it yet to discover. The voice Ezekiel heard speaks to us: "Son of man, I show thee greater abominations than these." Little charm ye can find, because little cheer ye can get out of these sermons, which wither your vain conceit. But they are not the less profitable. You prefer the small still voice of a kindly promise, or the rich tones of a glorious prophecy, and then you congratulate yourselves upon the happy Sabbath you have spent. I am not quite so sure that your emotions are the truest test of your interests. Is that always the most wholesome food your children get which has most sugar in it? Do they never get surfeited with luxury till they need medicine? Is comfort always the choicest blessing we can crave? Alas! we form so high an estimate of our estate, that to question whether we love the Lord Jesus Christ or not, lowers our dignity, annoys, vexes, and sadly grieves us.

Not that pride is the only incentive. *Shame crouches full often in the same obscure corner* where pride nestles. Both alike are disturbed by a gleam of daylight. Peter must have felt, when he heard the question for the third time, "Lovest thou me?" as if he could hear the cock crow again. He recollected the scene and circumstance of the dark betrayal hour. Does not the Lord remember my fear and my cowardice, the falsehood I told, the cursing and swearing I gave way to, and the paltry excuse that edged me on when the taunt of a poor silly maid was too much for an apostle? Ah! she annoyed me, she irritated me, I was conquered. I became a traitor, a blasphemer, almost an apostate. The tears, the bitter tears he wept on the morning of the crucifixion when Jesus looked upon him, welled up again from his heart into his eyes as the risen Lord looked into his face, and made him conscious how richly he deserved to be asked the question, "Lovest thou me?" Yes, and like bitter memories may cover some of us with shame. Bitter as gall must the recollections be to some of you who have so backslidden as to

publicly dishonour Christ. I do not want to say an unkind thing to you, but it is good sometimes to keep a wound open. The Bible tells of some sins God has freely forgiven and yet fully recorded. It is no marvel if we cannot forgive ourselves for having in any way brought dishonour and reproach upon the cross of Christ. The grief is healthy. We sing:—

“What anguish does that question stir,
‘If ye will also go?’”

But what deeper anguish may that other question stir, “Lovest thou me?” Our cheeks may well mantle with a crimson blush when we remember what grave cause for suspicion we have given to our Lord.

Not that wounded pride and conscious shame are the only sensations. *Peradventure fear distressed him.* Peter may have thought to himself, Why does my Lord ask me three times? It may be I am deluded, and that I do not love him. Before his fall he would have said, “Lord, thou knowest that I love thee; how canst thou ask me? Have I not proved it? Did I not step down into the sea at thy beck and call? I will go through fire and water for thee.” But Simon, son of Jonas, had learned to be more sober and less loud in his protestations. He had been tried; he had attempted to stand alone, and he had proved his palpable weakness. He looks dubious, he seems hesitant, he feels scrupulous. He is alive to the fact that the Lord knows him better than he knows himself. Hence the diffidence with which he asserts his confidence—“Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I do love thee.” A burned child is afraid of fire, and a scalded child shudders at hot water. So a precocious Peter feels the peril of presumption. His timidity troubles him. He hesitates to give his word of honour. Distrust of self distresses him. He dreams his former downfall o’er and o’er again. The hypocrisy of his own heart horrifies him. What can he say? He answers the accuser, or rather he appeals to the appellant, “Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” His previous guilt causes his present grief. Should like horrors haunt you, friends, give no place to grievous misgivings. Do not encourage them. Hie away to the cross; behold the thorny crown. Fly at once, poor guilty sinner, to the great atonement, which was made by the Lord upon the tree, and let that fear be ended once for all.

Not that it was all pride, or all shame, or all fear; I think *there was also love* in it. Peter *did* love his Master, and, therefore, he did not like to have a doubt or a dark suspicion cast on his sincerity. Love is a very jealous emotion, and keenly sensitive when questioned by those on whom it intensely doats. “Why,” Peter seems to say, “my Lord and Master, what would I not do for thee? Though I was so false, and so faithless in that hour of trial, yet I know that I am true in the very bottom of my heart.

My fall has not been a total one, nor a final one. There is in my soul, my Lord, a true, deep, and honest love to thee; I know there is." He could not bear to have that love questioned. What would the wife say if her husband should ask, "Lovest thou me?" and after she had given a fond assurance of affection, he should repeat the question solemnly, and with an earnest and a penetrating look, especially if she had done much to grieve him, and to make him suspect her? Oh! I can understand how her love at last would make her heart feel as if it must burst. With what earnestness she would exclaim, "Oh! my husband. If you could see my heart, you would see your name written there." It is hard, even in the conjugal relationship, to have a suspicion cast upon your affection. Because of the tenacity of his love, Peter was grieved. Had he not loved Christ so ardently he would not have felt the grief so acutely. Had he been a hypocrite he might have fired with anger, but he would not have grieved after this fashion. I tell some of our dear young people who get into trouble, and say they are afraid that they are hypocrites, that I never yet knew a hypocrite who said he was afraid he was one, and those who say that they are afraid they do not love Jesus, and are timid and trembling—though I do not commend them for their trembling, yet I have a much better hope of some of them than I have of others who are loud in their protests and vehement in asserting, "Though all men forsake thee, yet will not I." One is comforted to hear the confidence with which some of our young brethren can speak. Their warm expressions of love refresh us. Yet we cannot help feeling that they have got to be tried. Perhaps they will not be less confident in Christ when trial comes. They will be less confident in themselves; and it is just possible that, though their voices may be quite as sweet, they will yet not be quite so loud. Years of trial and temptation, and especially any experience of backsliding, will pluck some of the feathers out of us, and make us feel humble before the Lord. This grief of Peter, what a complex passion it was!

III. BUT IF IT HAS GRIEVED US TO HEAR THIS QUESTION, IT WILL BE VERY SWEET IF WE CAN TRULY GIVE THE ANSWER, "THOU KNOWEST ALL THINGS; THOU KNOWEST THAT I LOVE THEE."

Surely the preacher need not say any more if the hearers would just say what is in their own hearts. Let the question go round. With all your imperfections and infirmities, your wanderings and backslidings, can you nevertheless declare that you do love the Lord? Can you join in that verse:—

"Thou know'st I love thee, dearest Lord;
But, oh! I long to soar
Far from the sphere of earthly joy,
And learn to love thee more?"

If you can say that you love Christ from your very heart, how happy you ought to be! That love of yours is only a drop from the fountain of his own everlasting love. It is a proof that he loved you ere ever the earth was. It is also a pledge that he always will love you when the heavens and the earth shall pass away. “I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus’ hand is on thee, or else thy heart would not be on him, and that hand will never relax its grip. He himself has said it, “I give unto my sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand.” Now let your heart say, “What shall I do? What shall I render to him whom I love?” And the Saviour’s answer to you will be, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” You know his “commandments,” as to the holiness of your life, the nonconformity of your spirit to the world, your private communion with him. You know his commandment concerning your profession of your faith by baptism. You know his commandment, “This do ye in remembrance of me,” as often as ye break bread and take the cup of fellowship. You know his commandment, “Feed my lambs; feed my sheep.” Remember this, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

As for you who do not love my Lord and Master, what can I do but pray for you, that his great love may now overcome your ignorance and aversion—until, having first been loved of him, you love him in return. Jesus Christ would have you trust him. Faith is the first grace you need. Oh! come and depend upon him who did hang upon the cross. When you rest in him your soul is saved, and, being saved, it shall become your constant joy to love him who loved you, and gave himself for you. Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

JOHN XXI.

Verses 1-3. 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 could not do better. Idleness is the most injurious condition in which a man can be found. A preacher is much better occupied fishing than doing nothing.