

Do You Love Me

by Phil Beach Jr.

The sermon emphasizes the importance of loving Jesus above all else, and how this love should be demonstrated through our actions and relationships with others.

Duration: 50:18

Scripture: John 21:15

Topics: "Christian Life", "Love for Christ", "Prioritizing Jesus"

Description

Phil Beach Jr. emphasizes the profound question Jesus posed to Peter, 'Do you love me?' as the central issue in a believer's life. He reflects on his own journey of faith, revealing how God challenged him to prioritize his love for Jesus above all else, including ministry and material possessions. Beach Jr. argues that true love for Christ is not merely sentimental but requires action and sacrifice, urging believers to examine what truly holds the top place in their hearts. He highlights that love for Jesus should drive all aspects of life, including doctrine and fellowship, and that without this love, all other efforts are meaningless. Ultimately, he calls for a deep, committed love for Christ that transcends mere words.

Transcript

Let me just greet you in the lovely name of the Lord Jesus. It's good to be with you this morning and to share with you in worship and in the word. You have to get used to my accent.

You need an interpreter sometimes. I feel very much at home for two reasons. The first is that our fellowship back in South Africa meets in a hired hall just like this.

It's not the same, but it's a hired hall and the number of folk may be a few more than here this morning. Certainly the sentiments expressed by our brother Phil in terms of his desire for the Lord Jesus and to love him and to know him is our desire back home. I've been in the ministry for 33-odd years, but in the last few years there's been a change in the way that God has dealt with me.

I came out to the United States in February last year, preached in a number of places. I was here for about six weeks and then went back home again thinking, well, that was the only time I would ever preach in America. I never thought I would ever preach in America.

I live in a country town and I'm a country preacher. We have a few churches that are in fellowship together. Some of them I have started.

Some of them have just sprung up spontaneously. And I went back and a few months later I had a call to come back to Burbank, which is in Los Angeles, to stand in for a pastor who needed to go on vacation. I came back.

I went back to South Africa in September, I think it was last year, in 2003. And when I got back, as I said, over the last year or 18 months, I've been aware that God has been speaking to me and dealing with me about many things, particularly in terms of my own position in the work of the Lord. And, you know, I've been in the ministry full time and part time at different times, depending on the needs.

But the last few years I've been operating a business on the sideline, which has provided for our financial needs. And it just became a challenge to serve him full time and to be freed from material things, which is quite a difficult thing when you have many things. And when I went back in September last year, I just became aware of God dealing with me in a particular way.

And he was just drawing me out and near my house there is a, in fact, right next door to my house there is a forest, a very large forest. And I would go out there and just spend hours in the presence of the Lord. And the Lord began to challenge me about my love for him.

And that's the subject I want to share with you this morning. And that's why I believe that what the Lord has been saying to us so far in the services is in line with what I have on my heart. And so he just began to deal with me in a very, very deep way about many, many things in my own life and brought me down to this one issue as to all that matters is Jesus.

And the sentiments of a brother Phil was the conclusion of two months of God's dealing with me in a very, very deep way where I came to a point of understanding it wasn't even his word anymore. It wasn't his blessings. It was only Jesus.

That's all that matters. It's just Jesus. And while this was happening and I received another e-mail from Burbank asking to come back to California for a couple of months because the pastor who had started that church 35-odd years ago was physically no longer able to continue and he needed a break.

And so they asked me to come for two or three months to assist in just giving him a break. And so I discussed it with the elders back home and we came to a conclusion that this is what God wanted me to do. This is all over a matter of 10 days.

And so in 10 days we made the decision and I packed my bags and came out to Los Angeles in December. In fact, tomorrow will be 100 days since I left home. And it's been a very challenging time.

The day I arrived on the Saturday and he picked me up at the airport or at the bus station and on the Sunday I preached Sunday morning, Sunday lunchtime. He took me to lunch and told me that he was, that afternoon there was a council meeting of the church and he told me that he was going to announce his retirement that afternoon and that I was to take over the church. Now, that was nothing that I had prepared for and nothing that I desired.

It's a church with many problems. It has a large property, beautiful facilities, but with a heavy mortgage and a church which has somewhat been abused spiritually over the last many years. And so suddenly I found myself with a problem I never wanted and with decisions to make as to coming to the United States permanently.

And so I've been praying and I've committed to see the church through the transition period. Whether I will stay there, I don't know. So I'm going back home on Tuesday.

I'm very anxious to go back home. I have a beautiful home. I live in a beautiful country.

And it would be wonderful to be with my wife and with my family again. We've been trying to communicate by e-mail and it's been tremendously time consuming. We praise God for e-mail and for instant messaging.

But it's really not the real thing. And so I've been spending and I've been amazed at the amount of time it's just consumed. I've worked out that I've been spending three or four hours a day just chatting with my wife because I miss her so much.

And so I've been able to see a little blurry picture of her on the screen and talk as you can by e-mail or by instant messaging. So I'm looking forward to going home. And I'll be back in six weeks' time.

And she'll be coming back with me. And we'll stay in Los Angeles until the end of this year and see how God will lead us and direct us. We need your praise because it's a very difficult thing for us.

The culture is very different. The church is primarily the church has two parts. It's English and Spanish.

It has a Spanish church with two Spanish pastors and an English church. But the culture is very, very different to what we're used to. I'm more accustomed to people here in New Jersey seem to be closer to the people we used to back home.

But that's what God wants. We'll be living. I've been preparing an apartment in the church.

We have no windows. We have no fresh air. It's one of those sealed buildings.

And that's a new adventure for us because we're used to a lot of fresh air back in South Africa. So there are many challenges. So we covet your praise.

So that's where we are and that's where we come from. Can we? It's running? Okay. Let's turn to the Book of John, the Gospel according to John, Chapter 21.

And maybe you'll stand with me as we read, not for any religious reason, but we've been sitting for a long time and I tend to be long-winded. So if you need to stretch your legs, stand and let's read together. I know that when Nehemiah had the scriptures read in his reformation in the Book of Nehemiah, the people stood from morning until the midday as the word was read.

So we don't want to perpetuate that tradition, but I think we need to just stretch our legs. So let's read from the Gospel according to John, Chapter 21 and from verse 15. So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these? And he said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

And he said to him, Feed my lambs. And he said to him again a second time, Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me? And he said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. And he said to him, Tend my sheep.

He said to him the third time, Simon, son of Jonah, 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 all things. You know that I love

you. Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep.

Most assuredly I say to you that when you were younger you girded yourself and walked where you wished, and when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. This he spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he said to him, Follow me.

Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on his breast at the supper and said, Lord, who is the one who betrays you? Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, But, Lord, what about this man? And Jesus said to him, If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow me. Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? This is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen. Father, we thank you for your word and for the testimony of John concerning that which he had seen and which he had handled and which he had touched, the word of life.

And, Lord, we pray that even this morning as we consider again the words of the Lord Jesus to Peter, that, Lord, these words would become real and fresh to us, not, Lord, in an intellectual way, but, Lord, as your Spirit just deals with our hearts and draws us close to Jesus again. We ask these things in his precious name. Amen.

You may be seated. I'm sure you've heard many messages on this subject, and yet it's one that, as I said, because of the way that God has just been speaking to me over these last while, has become very, very real and very precious again. And you'll see that Jesus begins by addressing Peter in a special way.

And he says, Simon, son of Jonah, Simon bar Jonah, Simon, son of John, in some translations. This is the third time Jesus used this particular way of addressing Peter. So he was signifying that this was a crucial point in his relationship with Peter.

He calls Peter the same way when he called him from the nets. And then in the book of Matthew, when Peter had to make a decision as to who Jesus was, you remember he said to Peter, Who do men say that I am? And they gave various answers. And then he turns to Peter, and again he uses this name, Simon, son of Jonah, son of John.

Who do you say I am? And here again the third time. Those were the three most crucial points in Peter's experience and walk with the Lord Jesus. And so this is a very significant moment as Jesus says to Peter, Do you love me? Do you love me? And you know, one would seem to think, well, you know, why that question? Why didn't he ask him some other question? And I think that if you and I were in the same position, because you've got to remember what had just happened.

Peter had said a few days before, he said, Lord, everyone will forsake you, but I will never forsake you. And yet Jesus said to him this night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times. And he says, Lord, never me.

And yet in the very hearing of the Lord Jesus, because Peter was right there where Jesus was, and Jesus heard Peter, three times deny him. The third time was oaths. And remember that Jesus turned and he looked at Peter.

And Peter went out and he wept bitterly, because he had denied his Lord. And Peter was to be the one who was going to lead the people, lead the twelve, be the spokesman in many ways. And yet he had now failed in such a public way.

And I'm sure that if we had to ask Peter the questions that were important, if we were going to determine whether he would be the one who would be able to just be one of the twelve, and especially if he was going to be the spokesman, we would have many questions that we would ask him. If you had to interview for a pastor in your church, I'm sure you would have a long list of very important questions to ask. And if we were in Peter's position, I suppose the most important question we would want to ask is, Peter, why did you deny me? Jesus could have asked Peter, do you understand now what this is all about? Jesus could have questioned him about his doctrine.

Jesus could have questioned him about his understanding as to the cross and the fulfillment of the cross relative to the Old Testament Scriptures. He could have asked him about the resurrection. He could have asked him about many things.

And yet Jesus doesn't ask him these questions. He asks him this one question, which seems to be really not relevant to the issue at hand, because the issue really has to do with betrayal. Because three times he betrayed Jesus, three times he asks him the question.

So these two experiences, Peter's betrayal, denial, and the confession as to his love for the Lord, or his question, these two things are linked. And we say, but what does the one have to do with the other? And yet obviously Jesus understands that this is the question. This is the only question that matters, and it's the only question that matters today.

When we meet new people, new Christians, we ask them all sorts of questions. And since I've been traveling around, and I used to travel quite a bit in our own country, and whenever I meet new people, particularly if they are Christians, the question is always, especially when you're traveling and you're on the airplane or whatever, the question always is, what do you do? And I tell them I'm a preacher, because that is what I am. And the next question is always, what church do you belong to? What denomination are you in? And then the next question is, how big is your church? These are the most important questions to people in this world.

Jesus is not interested in what church you belong to. He's not interested in how big your church is. He's interested in one thing only.

In fact, he's not even particularly interested in your doctrine. Now, I want to clear that up, because I don't want you to get the impression that I'm saying that doctrine is not important. Doctrine is very, very important.

And my ministry and my whole approach has to do with teaching correct doctrine. That's what I teach. That's what I stand for.

I don't for one moment minimize the importance of doctrine. But it is not as important as the question as to whether we love him. Because the Lord Jesus himself, when he was asked the question as to what is the

greatest commandment, you remember he said the first command is to love the Lord.

The second which is equal to it is love your neighbor. That is the issue, because he says on these hang all of the law and the commandments. Everything depends on this one crucial issue, as to whether we love him.

And in the New Testament it is no different. Today it is no different. If we love him, our doctrine will not be an issue, because we will obey his commandments.

We will love his word. And we will love his church. But we can have all of the other things, but if we don't love him, it is a waste of time.

Paul is very clear about this in 1 Corinthians 13. He says you can have all the gifts of the spirit. You can have all knowledge.

And he is not talking about knowledge about science. He is talking about knowledge about the things of God. You can know everything about the word of God.

You can make the most profound sacrifices in your service of God. Even to the extent of becoming a martyr for the faith. If it is without love, it is nothing.

It is a waste of time. And so correct doctrine, correct church structure, a knowledge of the word, serving God faithfully, going to church regularly, doing whatever it is. If it is not driven and motivated by this one issue, this one question that I love him above everything else, is a waste of time.

But if I do love him, everything else will fall into its proper place. And you know that has to be the basis of any form of fellowship. When two Christians come and meet together, the question, the issue is not whether we are agreed in doctrine.

The question is whether we both really love Jesus. That is the only question. Because if you really love him, and I really love him, and from that will flow a love for one another.

And if that is present, it does not matter how far apart we are doctrinally, we will find the truth between us. Not necessarily even in a compromise. But whatever the truth is.

And I do not believe that the truth is a grey mess, a mess of different things and different views. I believe that the truth is very, very definite and very clearly defined. But if you and I both love Jesus, and we love one another as a result of that, it does not matter how far apart we are doctrinally, we will be able to work through the issues and the differences, and we will be able to come to a common faith.

That is what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 4. He says that we must endeavor to keep the unity of the faith, until we all come to the unity of the spirit. And so, this is the only issue that matters. This is the only issue that matters in your relationship with the Lord Jesus this morning.

And that was the only issue that mattered for Peter. And folks, when we speak about love for the Lord, I'm not speaking about the sort of sentimental, sappy kind of love that we hear about in churches today. And you know, I've been very powerfully moved by John's writings in his epistles, because our common view of John, we look at John as a little bit soft.

You know, he was a little bit of a, maybe a Nancy. Is that a term you understand? He was a little bit of a sissy. He was touchy-feely, he lay on Jesus' bosom.

I mean, that's not a thing that real men do. And so, he speaks about love all the time. He's the apostle of love.

And we say, well, you know, that was John. You know, he was a little bit that way. But you read his epistles carefully.

And you know that John is more hard line and more straight down the line than Paul ever was. He says, if you say you love God and you can't get on with your brother, he says, you lie. The truth is not even in you.

He says, if you say you love God and you don't love your brother, he says, you are walking in darkness and you don't have a clue where you're going. Now, I mean, Paul never got that hard. You see, John's understanding of love is not this wishy-washy, sappy stuff.

This is the reality of Christianity. He says, if you say you love God and you don't walk in the light of his word, you don't know anything. He says, you know nothing.

Read 1 John again. And you'll discover that here is a man who understood that love is not a feeling. Love is not some emotional thing I get when I sing nice songs.

Love is the substance of that which drove Christ to the cross. And it is love that will cause me to love my brother in spite of the fact that he is unlovely and objectionable and awkward and difficult to get on with. Love will cause me to do something.

Because he says, don't just love in word only. I mean, if ever that word, that message was relevant, it's relevant today. People love to talk about love.

They love to speak about love in marriage and in relationships and in the church. And they say, well, yeah, we love God, we love everything, you know. But he says, love indeed.

Prove your love. Prove your love. And right now, one of the things that frustrates me is that I find that in churches all over the United States, all over the world, people are singing songs about love.

But when they go out, there's no substance, there's no reality, there's no proof of that love. You know, the amazing thing is that God never sent a messenger to tell us that he loved us in the Old Testament. There's the odd revelation of his love.

He never sent an angel to tell us, to preach to us that he loved us. But he proved his love on the cruel cross of Calvary. And yet we think that our love for him is somehow, you know, as long as we just sing about love and we say, Lord, I love you, that that's sufficient.

But it's not sufficient. That love needs to become real and needs to be made manifest the same way as his love for me was made real and manifest. How do I know that he loves me? Because I get a feeling about him? No, because I'm able to look at the cross of Calvary.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. And yet as Christians we say, you know, I love the brethren, I love the church. And then a brother comes and says, you know, my motor car's broken, will you come and help me this afternoon? You know, Sunday afternoon, you know, I normally

have a little sleep and watch a little bit of television and, you know, it's nice and warm.

No, well, brother, you know, I'm busy today. It's easy to say we love one another. It's another thing to do it.

It's another thing to put it into action and to put it into practice. And he says that true love lays down his life for his brother. Lays down his life.

In fact, we find it hard just to give up a few minutes for one another. Never mind laying down our lives. And, you know, when it comes to a dispute or an argument between brothers, for me to lay down my rights just for a few moments for my brother, yet I say I love him? You see, it's easy to say, you know, Lord, I love you and, you know, I'll serve you and I'll go to China to go and preach to the lost out there.

When he's simply asking me to be salt and light where I am, to speak to the man at the corner shop about his salvation. Speak to my neighbor. You know, I'll go and preach to people on the other side of the world.

But can I speak to people? You see, it's easy to speak about these theories and about some kind of theoretical understanding of these things. But the love that he is speaking to Peter about here, and Peter understood this, was more than just words, more than just songs. This was going to require substance.

And Jesus says this to him. And he says to him, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished. But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands.

Another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. This he spoke signifying by what death he would glorify God. So Jesus says to him, the commitment you're making is to loving me is not just something about words.

You're going to pay. You're going to have to make it, add substance to it. And so Jesus asks him this question.

And you'll see that there's a slight difference in his response. And I'm sure that you know that the question that Jesus asks of him in verse 15, Simon son of Jonah, do you love me? The word there, love, being agape, being the highest form of divine, unselfish love. And Peter's response is, Lord, I fully owe you.

I have an affection for you. I like you with a brotherly kind of love. And I've heard many explanations as to what that really means.

And maybe I can offer you my understanding of this. And that is that this is a profound statement that Peter now makes. We normally say, well, you know, Jesus says, do you agape me? And Peter says, I fully owe you.

Jesus says, do you truly love me? And Peter says, I have an affection for you. Clearly, this is not what Jesus wanted to hear. And we would say, well, this is the wrong answer.

And that's why Jesus asks him the second and the third time, because he wasn't getting the right answer from Peter. I believe that Peter was giving the right answer. And he said, but how come this can be the right answer? Because Jesus was wanting him to love him with an unselfish, sacrificial, divine kind of love.

And Peter says, no, I don't do that. And yet I believe that in this very confession, because it's based on this first confession of Peter, that Jesus says, feed my lambs. Not even feed my sheep.

You see, he begins with the lambs. The lambs need the most love. The lambs are the most difficult ones to shepherd.

Why is this so important that Peter doesn't say, Lord, I agape you, but I fully owe you? Because it proves, it shows a change in Peter. You see, because if Jesus asked him this question ten days before, what would Peter's response have been? Lord, what a question. Of course I agape you.

That's Peter. That's the way he always responded. He would just off the bat say, Lord, there's no question about it.

I absolutely love you with a divine love. There's no question about this. But you see, for the first time in his life, Peter had come face to face with the frailty of his humanity.

For the first time, he understood and he recognized that he wasn't the self-made man that he thought he was. That his love and his affection was fickle. That his commitment and his devotion to his master was frail.

And I believe that that moment when Peter walked out from Pilate's hall and stood outside and he wept before the Lord. For the first time in his life, he faced up to who he really was. In fact, until we come to a realization as to how weak we really are, we will never be able to love him.

And that's why Paul says, he says, I don't rejoice in the fact that I'm overcoming and I'm powerful and I think I've got it together. He says, but when I'm weak, then I'm not strong. Because his strength is made perfect in my weakness.

And this is not a popular message today. Because today we want to hear that I'm good and I'm great and I have it all together. And I'm overcoming and I'm victorious.

And you know, God needs me. The message of repentance. The message of the fact that there is nothing good within me.

But you know, God really needed to save me. God needed me. God saved the world because he needed the world.

He needed the church. He was lonely without us. In fact, this is nonsense.

God is complete and perfect within himself. He doesn't need us. He never did need us.

Yes, he wants us. There's a difference between wanting us and needing us. He wants us.

He reaches out to us. He wants a relationship with us. But he is not incomplete without us.

He's not lonely without us. He didn't need to save us. And he didn't need me.

There are many better men than I who can preach better than I can preach, who are more eloquent, who are more balanced, who are more all sorts of other things than I ever am. God didn't need to save me. He didn't need to call me.

He didn't need to give me a ministry. It's just his grace. That's all.

And until we come to an understanding of the fact that, Lord, I just don't have it together. Without you, I am nothing. That old Pentecostal evangelical song, without him I'd surely fail.

That's right. And until we come up to this point, Peter thought he could do it. Peter thought he had it together.

He thought he had the personality. He had the background. He had the leadership.

He had the charisma. He had everything it took to become this great man who would take forward the work of Jesus Christ. And that night as he went outside and he looked into his own soul, and he understood that at the core, he was weak.

That was when things changed for Peter. And that is why his response here is so significant. Because for the first time in Peter's life, he is honest with himself and with his master.

And he says, Lord, I cannot say I love you with a divine love. I can only say I have an affection for you. How often do we sing these songs? How often do we pray and we say, Lord, I love you? And yet, how much reality is there to it? How real is that? And Jesus says to him again a second time in verse 16, Simon, son of Jonah, Do you love me? Do you agape me? And he said to him, Yes, Lord.

You know that I filio you. I have an affection for you. And he said to him, Tend my sheep.

And he said to him a third time, Simon, son of Jonah, Do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time. Now the third time Jesus says to him, Do you filio me? Do you even have an affection for me? And of course, this was a very hard thing for Peter because he knew that he couldn't say he agape him. But now the question is, Do you even have an affection for me? Peter says, Lord, you know all things.

You know that I love you. But Jesus says also to him, Do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than these? And there's a lot of discussion as to who the these or what the these was. Did he say, did he mean, Do you love me more than these other disciples? Or did you love me more than the fish? And even in relation to the other disciples, was he saying, Do you love me more than they love me? Or do you love me over above them? These are all possibilities.

And I don't believe the question was his love relative to the other disciples, whether he loved the Lord Jesus more than the other disciples loved Jesus. Because you can clearly see in his response concerning John, because he then looks and Peter's still not really, you know, there's still so much of the old Peter left. And that's something we all just struggle with.

And so Peter looks and he says, Well, what about John? And Jesus says, Never forget about John. The issue is not your brother. There's that old song also.

It's not my brother nor my sister. But it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. And so Jesus is clearly not dealing with Peter relative to the other disciples.

He's not asking him, Do you love me more than they love me? The issue is Peter. Do you love me more than these? Why is it not specific? I believe because it's not specific, especially so that it may include anything and everything. And so the question to you today and the question to me is simply, Do I love him more than anything in this world? More than anything.

Again, it's so easy to say, Yes, Lord, I love you more than anything. I love you more than everything in this world. But is that real? Is that true? And, you know, during this time and part of the reason why I shared that introduction with you is so you may understand the point I'm about to make.

And this is a hard confession to make. But as the Lord began to deal with me, he began to take me through various things in my life. He began to deal with my personal positions.

With my motor cars. And I have a beautiful little red Porsche Spyder racing car, which I really enjoy driving in the hilly mountains of our country. He began with that.

He said, Will you give up the Spyder? And that wasn't particularly difficult. He then began to deal with my house. And I just bought, at the beginning of last year, a new house in a new area.

Beautiful views overlooking the city and overlooking the valleys. My dream house. All my life I've worked for a house like that.

And he said, Will you give up this house? And that was a little bit harder. And he began to ask me about everything in my life. Every single position.

Some of them very valuable. Some of them having great sentimental value. Back home I work at a desk at which four generations of preachers, my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my mother, all of them preachers of the word, have worked at that desk preparing their messages.

Will you give up this desk for me? I have a great workshop. I make knives as a hobby back home. Will I give up the workshop? I've spent my life putting that workshop together.

I have the most amazing collection of tools. Every one of them brought under difficult times and put together over years and years. Will you give up your workshop? Do you love me more than that? And eventually it came down to, in terms of material things, it came down to my books, which are my most valuable thing.

Will you give up your library? And that was hard because I said, Well, Lord, it doesn't matter where you want me to go. I'll ship my library out. I'll take it with me wherever I need to go.

And eventually, and this was over a matter of days and weeks and a couple of months, I came to a point where he said, Just the Bible. Are you prepared to just have the word, never mind the library? And I came to a point where I said, Yes, Lord, I will give up my library for you. He then began to deal with me about my family and about my loved ones.

Will I give them up? Do I love him more than those things? In fact, it's easy to say these things in a few moments. It's easy to think, Well, yeah, you know, I would do that. I would do that.

But you know, when these things become so real, and as God just made these things real to me and it became so real to me that I felt that I was going to lose these things that day, that God would take my family away from me that day, then it becomes, Am I prepared to lose my wife and my daughters and others that are precious to me for him? Do I love him more than these things? And when I thought that he dealt with everything in my life and that there was nothing between me and him anymore, he came to the most touchy point in my life, my ministry. Now, you need to understand that this is my life. All the other things are inconsequential, really, in comparison to my ministry.

This is who I am. This is what God has called me for. This is what God has saved me.

This is my purpose. This is my life. And God said to me, Do you love me more than your ministry? And I said, Lord, what a question.

See the old Peter. Of course I love you more. And you know, I will never forget this.

As I sat on the side of that hill overlooking the city and just something within me, God says, I'm going to take your ministry away from you. I'm going to destroy your ministry. And God was using various situations in my life and various attacks that had come against me, false accusations and all sorts of things.

And it was as real as though my ministry was going to end tomorrow. And I said, Lord, I love you more than the ministry. And yet I knew deep down that if I had to lose my ministry, if I could never preach again, my whole life would come to an end because this is what I've lived for since I was a young boy.

And the question then was, Do I love him more than I love preaching? Now, if you're not a preacher, you won't understand that. I'm sure Brother Phil will understand this. I said, Of course, Lord, I love you more than I love preaching.

And you know, he just asked me a simple question and it was as though I'm speaking to you. There was no voice, but I just knew in my heart this is what God was saying to me. And he simply said to me, You love preaching, but you find it easier to preach than to pray.

And I knew that that was the truth. Because all my life I've struggled to pray. It's hard for me to pray.

Easy for me to preach. Preaching comes naturally. And I instantly knew that I loved him less than I loved preaching.

I enjoyed being in the pulpit more than I enjoyed being in his presence. That's a very hard point to come to, to understand that as you spent 33 years of your life chasing the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. Never mind about the people who've been saved.

Never mind about the churches that have been established. Never mind about everything you've done. You've missed the point.

Because the point is not working for me. The point is loving me. And I had to come to a point where I said, Lord, you can take everything.

I never want to preach again. I just want to be in your presence. I just want to love you.

I just want to know your presence in my life. That's all that matters. That changed my prayer life.

For the first time in all of my time of being saved, 35 years I've been saved, I just want to be with him. Now, I'm sharing that with you not to draw attention to me, but to try and illustrate how easy it is. And as Jill and I were just talking in the car as we were coming about some of the experiences, because she and I have been walking together for a long, long time, about some of the old preachers that we knew who missed the mark, who are no longer effective for God because they've somehow lost out, and how easy it is for preachers to get so involved in the business of preaching and pastoring and doing the work of God and not have a relationship with him.

And it's so easy to go through the motions and to do the various things and to miss out on the most important thing. Do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than these? That is the question. Do you love Jesus more than the singing? Do you love him more than just coming together here this morning? Do you love him more than the word? That was a hard question for me to answer.

Because some of us love this word so much that somehow the word becomes more important than Jesus. And in the book of Revelation we have the message to the seven churches. One of those messages, the first message, is to the church of Ephesus.

And when you look at that church, this was a model church, and it would be wonderful to have a church like that today. That church had no worldliness. They had never compromised the truth.

They had never compromised on holiness. They had never compromised on any aspect of the church. They had it all together.

And they are commended for 11 different things or 10 different things. He commends them for their faithfulness, for their stand for the truth, for the fact that they were testing teachers and apostles who were coming and claiming to be apostles of Christ, and they judged them according to the scriptures and found them to be liars, to not be the true apostles. You know, there are very few churches that can do this today.

And you can go through any city in any part of the world and you won't find very few, very, very few churches that are able to stand up to the standard that was set by the Ephesian church. And yet in spite of all of that, the Lord Jesus writes to them and He says, you need to repent. You need to repent because He says you have fallen.

Not you've just slipped up. Not this is just a minor little speed wobble, you know, this is just a minor little issue. He says, look where you have fallen from.

You are in a fallen state. You are backslidden. Now, I don't know if you're Calvinist or Arminian, it doesn't matter.

But He says, you are fallen, you are backslidden, even though you've got your doctrine together, you've got your church structure together, you have it all together, this is a model church. And yet He says, I'm about to remove your lampstand. I'm about to revoke your credentials as a church.

Why? Because you've left your first love. That's the only issue. They were doctrinally correct, they were structurally correct, they were having the right meetings, they were doing all of the right things, they were about materialism or anything about worldliness.

This was a holy, righteous, Bible-believing, upright church. They had one issue, one problem only. They had left their first love.

Not lost, left their first love. Now we have to resolve the question as to what does first love mean? And I know that you've heard and read many commentators who tell you that first love is the kind of love you had when you first got saved. Now let me just tell you very quickly that I don't believe that that's what God wants.

I don't believe that He wants us to have that kind of love. Let me explain this to you from two points. First of all, what did we have when we first got saved? We had an infatuation.

Now you can't build a relationship on an infatuation. I know in many marriages, particularly wives, why can't we have what we had when we first got married? But you can't build a relationship on that. Because it's an emotional thing which is wonderful and it's great and then the next morning suddenly it's just gone again.

And it's up and it's down and it's hot and it's cold. That kind of love in a relationship has to make place for something deeper than that. For a deep commitment.

No matter how I feel, no matter what comes against us, I will remain committed to you. And I believe that in our relationship with God, He's not looking for that kind of thing where we're madly in love with Him and yet the next morning we don't even know if we're saved. It has to become deeper than that.

So what is He speaking about when He speaks about your first love? He's not speaking about first in a sequence of events, the way in which that word is used. He's speaking about first in an order. In an order.

So what should be number one is no longer number one, it has now become number two or three and something else has become number one in your life. Maybe He never was number one. And obviously the question is not what should be number one, it should be Him.

But the issue we have to resolve as far as the Church of Ephesus is concerned, because this relates to us, is what had taken the place of Jesus. What was number one in their lives? And if you look at the Church of Ephesus, it was Christianity. It was the Church.

It was the doctrine. It was the Bible. It was the worship.

It was the fellowship of the saints. They loved all of these things and yes, those things were good, but they had taken the place of Jesus. And so the question is, is Jesus number one in your life? Is He that which you love above everything else? Peter, do you love me more than these? I don't know what it is that drives you and motivates you in your life, whether it's your career or your possessions or your family or your ego or yourself.

Many of us love ourselves more than anything else. And that's why we love the preachers that tell us to love ourselves. Jesus says, unless a man denies himself, he cannot be my disciple.

The question is simply, do you love Him? Is He number one in your life? Is He above everything else? Will you literally give up everything that you have, everything that you own, everything that is important and precious to you, whether that is material or whether it is emotional or spiritual, are you willing to give up everything for Jesus and have Him and Him only and Him alone? And I believe Peter understood that that was the question. Peter said, Lord, I can't really say that. And so Jesus asks him a third time, Peter, can you even say that? You have an affection for me.

And Peter's grieved because He said to him a third time, do you have an affection for me? And he said, Lord, you know everything. You know everything. You know my heart.

You know my heart. Lord, it's no good me telling you that I love you because you know the reality of what is deep down in my heart. So that's the question.

And I'm not going to make an appeal because I don't want you to make an emotional response. I believe this is something you need to go home and say, do I really love Him above everything else? Am I willing to

make every sacrifice that's necessary? Am I willing to walk away from everything I have and everything that's precious and dear to me? That I may just have Jesus. That I may just have Him and a relationship with Him because that's all that matters.

Amen.

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