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Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden
at Rehoboth Chapel, Swindon
on Thursday evening 7 October 1954

John 21 v 17

"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"

Simon Peter's case, in close proximity to Judas's case, is left on record for our instruction and our warning. How exceedingly solemn too it was, that, even when the blessed Redeemer was about to be betrayed and taken away to be examined and mocked, there was a contention among the disciples as to who should be the greatest! Peter, ever impulsive, thought and believed, and told the Lord, that whatever took place he would not leave Him; he was willing and ready to go to prison and to death for Him and with Him. But Peter had to learn a very solemn lesson, and a very blessed lesson. The solemn lesson was, that he was not able to keep himself. He fell most foully, in spite of the warning the Lord gave to him. But he was restored most freely and blessedly, so that sovereign grace shone in his case. The sovereignty of God that made the difference between those two disciples is unspeakably solemn.

In this discourse of Christ's with Simon Peter, three times the Lord asked him if he loved Him. He began by saying, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these?" He had seemed to profess to have more love, determined he would not leave the Lord; and he said, "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? Why was he grieved? Well

doubtless Peter had a very painful sense of shame that he should thrice have denied his Lord; and doubtless this was the purpose of Christ in asking the same question three times.

What I wanted to notice particularly was Peter's third reply, which is different from the former two. "He said unto Him, Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He had a kind of refuge, not in himself, not in his tenacity of purpose, but in the Lord's perfect knowledge of him. His heart was not to be trusted even in this matter. "Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest how and why I denied Thee; Thou knowest the sorrow that it has produced in my heart; Thou knowest my desire; and Thou knowest that notwithstanding all, there is love in my heart to Thee. O what a test it was! If this test were put to us, what should we say? It is said very lightly often by religious professors, "Do you love the Lord?" And people say "Of course we do!" But how little do we love Him! How treacherous and deceitful are our hearts! And how many times we have practically denied Him! And what a carnal mind we have, which is enmity against Him! It is not easy for people who know themselves to assert boldly their love for Christ. That blatant, empty, noisy profession of love which deceives and pleases so many, will be nauseous to those who have some respect to the Lord's glory and holiness and their own sinfulness, their own defections, their own deficiencies. "He said unto Him, Lord, Thou knowest all things". This was an appeal, a heartfelt appeal of Peter's to the Lord. The Lord knew every motive, every motion, every thought, every desire, of Peter's heart. It is good and wholesome, I believe, when, instead of that easy response, "Of course I love Him", we are enabled to expose our cases to Him, and to confess our many sins, and to ask Him to analyse our hearts and see if we do love Him.

It is not easy for me to say I love Christ. When I look at myself, that professed love seems to be denied. Look at the thoughts, the imaginations, the shortcomings, the lack of obedience, the neglect of His Word, the indifference comparatively to His honour, that seems to negate our professed love. But doubtless in Peter's case, and doubtless in some of

your cases, there is this:

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is cold and faint

And why is that your chief complaint? Why is it a trouble and a sorrow to you that your heart is not so fervent, that there are idols, that your heart is often divided? Why is it this brings a trouble? And why, under all this, does the Lord see rising up in your heart a prayer that He would come in and fill your heart with His presence, and get your heart to Himself? And why is it that, notwithstanding all your native rebellion, there is something in you that longs to submit and surrender to His holy will? "Thou knowest all things." It is not that Peter was here presenting himself before the Lord as meritorious, as if the Lord knew he possessed merit; but in spite of all his disgrace and shame he appealed to the Lord "Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee."

Now love, real love, is the consequence of knowledge. We cannot love the Lord unless we know Him. My old Pastor at Brighton used to say, when people said, Do you love the Lord? - "I should say rather: Do you know Him? For if you know Him, you cannot do other than love Him". Peter knew the Lord, saw Him, heard Him, tasted of His gracious words; and yet he denied Him. And some of us, though we have not seen Him with the eye of sense, can say in our little measure we have known Him. He makes Himself known to His people, to convicted sinners, in His precious Word by His Spirit; makes Himself real to their faith, makes His fulness, His preciousness, His atoning sacrifice, His glorious Person, His justifying righteousness, His wondrous suffering death, and that precious intercession which He exercises, real; and all that will make you admire Him. O, said Peter, when he wrote subsequently in this Epistle, He is precious unto them that believe! He was precious to Peter, and He is precious. He makes Himself precious, to all to whom He reveals Himself. Are there not times, have there not been, when in His holy Word by His Spirit, you have heard His voice, that still small voice of Christ's Spirit in your heart, His graciousness,

the accents of compassion, tenderness in His Word to a broken-hearted sinner, inviting you to come, declaring His redeeming love, and drawing you to Himself?

Not with our mortal eyes
Have we beheld the Lord;
Yet we rejoice to hear His name,
And love Him in His Word.

said one of our hymn-writers. And have you not, some of you, felt at times in reading the Scriptures - perhaps the account we read just now (Luke 22 verses 24-71) and following on, the account of His mocking, being spit upon, and His garden agony, and the crucifixion - have you not seen through the Scriptures with the eye of faith, that holy, sacred, marred visage and form of Incarnate Deity, and felt your whole heart go out to Him, and all your trust placed upon His merit and His work? O the emphasis that you will feel sometimes of that word in Peter "Unto you therefore which believe He is precious!"

In one certain sense He is more precious the more deeply we are convinced of our innumerable shortcomings, and failures, and transgressions. O how sweet is repentance! Bitter remorse is dreadful; helpless grief is deadly; but real repentance is very sacred. Though Peter wept bitterly - briny tears he must have wept when the Lord looked upon him - I quite believe there was some sweetness mingled with those bitter tears, because in that look of Christ there was no wrath, but injured love. And have not some of you - I hope it is so with myself in a small measure - felt a little of that kind injured love looking into your heart? "I have redeemed thee, return unto Me." O my friends, it implies this: "All those sufferings, all that bitter agony, all that reproach and spitting, all that pain and travail of soul on the cross, relate to your sins and My love to you". There is nothing like redeeming love shed abroad in the heart to kindle love in the heart to the Lord. If we are little sinners, our love will be very small. Yet it is true to say, in vital experience there are no such things as little sins or little sinners. Simon entertained the Lord very poorly, but into his

house there came a woman, a sinner, and she washed Christ's feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Simon was offended, and spoke to the Lord concerning it. The Lord informed him of the blessed truth - she was forgiven much, and therefore she loved much. I am positive of this, that no pardoned sinner, no sinner who receives a sense of redeeming love and blood-bought pardon into his conscience, will think himself a little sinner. Each will feel himself a chief sinner, the least of saints. The one thing that will take away that contention as to who is the greatest, is a sense of redeeming love and of indebtedness to the Lord Jesus and all His dreadful sufferings for a hope of heaven. That will humble a man, that will take down self and pride, and lay a sinner low in his right place, in the dust of self-abasement. Humiliation is one thing; humility is quite different. We may come into humiliating circumstances and be as proud as Lucifer because of our injured pride, because our self-consequence is touched. But if you are conducted by the Spirit into the Garden of Gethsemane by faith, and to the cross of Calvary, and have on your heart the least token of your interest in that precious suffering sacrifice, in that dear loving Redeemer, that will make you actively lie low. It will bring you down and make you feel you cannot get low enough. Humility is not an effort; it is a grace. It is the consequence of the knowledge of Christ and always accompanies love to Him.

"He said unto Him, Lord, Thou knowest all things." Ah, some of us have to go to Him at times with our cases, the tumult that is within, the ignorance, the foolishness, the carnality, the unfaithfulness, the evil thoughts, our weakness, our vulnerability, our errors, and our temptations: "Thou knowest all things, Lord, and Thou knowest after all this, there is that beneath that wants to come to the top; we do love Thee, and pray Thee to enable us to love Thee more, to put these enemies down." Love is a very jealous thing; it will brook no rival. You may perhaps in that way be able even to believe that you have a little love to Christ. If you hear His Name dishonoured, or if you feel rising up in your heart those evil things that are in your nature, the carnal mind which is enmity, the dreadful unbelieving suggestions against Him, and these things grieve you

and you are jealous of your heart - it is good to feel it. "Thou knowest all things, Lord; Thou knowest I am not what I would be, that I do not love Thee as I ought and would; but Thou knowest that I love Thee and would love Thee more."

To a convicted believer taught of the Spirit, there is no object that can really take the place of Christ; and when the Lord Jesus is absent, love goes after Him. Don't you find that? In the prophecy of Isaiah it is said "Men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside Thee, what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him." In quoting that the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians says "For them that love Him." And love will wait and never be satisfied until the object of love is seen, embraced, and possessed. It is not only a question of being saved. It is that; there is no Saviour but Christ. But there is no Lord, no King, no satisfaction, short of Christ. He is the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely, to all to whom He makes Himself known.

"Thou knowest that I love Thee". Why do you love Him? The reason ultimately is this - "because He first loved you". The immediate reason is, because He manifests Himself to you and makes Himself precious in His Person and in what He gives, and what He does, and what He says, and what He is doing, in His all-sufficiency, in His faithfulness, in His immutability, in His promises. O my friends, there is something amiable in Him! But this ultimate reason, if we really love Him, is because He first loved us. That will as it were eclipse our love. Our love is not worth considering, though it is considered by the Lord, but only as a fruit of His love. His love is a flame; His love is unquenchable, no floods can drown it. If you have a little love to Him, it is because He had love to you from eternity, and when you are enabled to trace that out, and to see by the Spirit's teaching that that love was exercised in His taking your nature, coming down to the earth, laying aside His royal estate, being a poor despised Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, going about doing good, living a holy life, and dying a bitter, sacred death, and all in your interest and to put away your sin and

redeem you to God, well, that love will swallow you up. A little touch of it is wonderfully sweet.

But, see the Lord's reply: "Jesus saith unto him, Feed My sheep". You say you love Me, now what are the outward evidences? Ministering to the saints. I know this may perhaps chiefly refer to the ministry, as Paul said to the elders of Ephesus when he gave them a charge to "feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20 v 28), but it is not confinable to that. All the service that is rendered to the saints, acceptable to God, is from love. A cup of cold water given to a disciple out of love to the Lord Jesus because that person is a disciple of Christ, is acceptable to the Lord. Now this is the real and only acceptable principle of all the service that is rendered to the saints of God. Ordinary natural benevolence is on a lower plane, good in its place. Only the Lord's people are capable of rendering this service by that principle. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren". But we cannot know the brethren unless we are born again. We cannot see the kingdom of God unless we are born from above. This unites the people of God. You remember how very solemnly, in the 6th of Hebrews, the Apostle speaks of religious people, great professors, professing much knowledge, much tasting of the Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, who fell away and whom it was not possible to restore to repentance, because they put the Lord Jesus to an open shame. O I have looked at that word sometimes, and have shaken for fear I should be left to that! Peter was left to deny His Lord, but he was restored. It was not deliberate, though we are not to extenuate Peter's sin. Divine grace restored him; love was manifested to him, and he did love the Lord and died ultimately in love to Him, a martyr's death. Sovereignty is behind it all.

But in the 6th Hebrews, the Apostle turns to those holy brethren, and says that he was persuaded better things of those Hebrew professors than he had been speaking of. He spoke in a warning way. Then he turns and says "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have showed toward

His Name, in that ye have ministered to the saints and do minister." It does not mean that an affluent person can buy the Lord's favour and blessing by giving a few pound notes to the poor of God's people, but it does mean this - and where the love of Christ is in the heart there will be this - a real tender regard for the good of the children of God, and there will be a desire to minister to them so far as ability is given. "Feed my sheep". And I might say this, that I believe it is impossible for one who loves the Lord Jesus because He knows Him, and has a sweet persuasion that He died for him and is his dear Redeemer, it is impossible for that person not to love the saints of God, and he will exercise that love very largely in secret prayer. Do you pray for the people of God in secret? People have lists of prayer today, and all sorts of automatic arrangements in their religion, but if your religion is of the Holy Ghost, you will find sometimes your heart well up with love to the Lord Jesus and love to His people, great and small, known and unknown; some in heaven, some upon earth. You will not pray for those in heaven, though they are introducing prayers for the dead again now in the Anglican Church. It is a terrible error and implies a violation of that word "Absent from the body, present with the Lord." But you will give thanks upon the remembrance of the saints in heaven, and you will find yourself tenderly and fervently praying with all your heart sometimes for all the saints upon earth, and some in particular who are in trouble, in affliction. No one sees it but the Lord. It is not paraded, but it is a sacred privilege. Job had his adversity turned by God when he prayed for his friends. We do not pray for other people in order that our adversity may be turned, but I am sure of this, you will find your heart enlarged and warmed when you are enabled to pray for the Lord's people. I have found sometimes when I could hardly pray for myself, I have been enabled to pray for one and another of the Lord's dear people, and my heart has warmed and enlarged, and I have got near the Lord and felt such a sweet union with the people of God, that has made me long to join "the general assembly and church of the first-born".

"Feed My sheep" Minister to the saints; do good to all men, but especially to the household of faith. This is a test; it is

a test of obedience to the Lord, for He said, giving a new commandment - "Love one another". There is no restraint in this. Liberality naturally is very beneficent among men, but this freedom of spirit in the love of Christ in the heart is something on a higher plane altogether. But we cannot trust our own hearts. Yet if we can appeal to the Lord, He will not condemn us. If you can expose yourself to Him, and tell Him you cannot trust your heart, but you would love Him more, and pray that you may know Him more and walk more tenderly before Him, He will not resent that prayer. He knows the desire, and He knows the trouble that His people feel because they are so short in everything that is good.

[Well, this evening there is to be a collection for the Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund which does seek to minister to a number of our infirm and sick friends in a very practical way. We have been very favoured with contributions, and it is to be hoped that not a few friends have, in contributing, done so out of love to the Lord, and that is a privilege. I do not like begging for money, but I do feel it will be profitable for us to be exercised as to our motive in supporting such a thing as that. It may bring too an exercise in secret as to our souls' cases, and we may be enabled to press our case upon the Lord, that He will come to us and endear Himself to us afresh, dethroning every idol and filling us with His sacred presence and His dying love. I hope we are pilgrims, wayfaring men. I hope we have a city before us.] And if we are thus brethren in the Lord, it behoves us to walk tenderly, and, as I have already said, the one thing that will humble us and save us from contentions, jealousies and animosities, and save us from compromising the truth, and make us zealous for the glory of Christ, is a knowledge of His dying love shed abroad in our hearts.

AMEN.