

"Lovest Thou Me?"**T. Austin-Sparks:**

Reading: John 21:15-23

We are now nearing the end of our contemplation of "His great love," and we shall conclude with a word on the way of love. It is still through the Apostle John that the message is coming to us. His writings are the last of the New Testament, and the final and predominant feature is love.

The twenty-first chapter of his Gospel is a kind of appendix; almost like an afterthought. He seems to have concluded at the point marked verse thirty-one of chapter twenty, and then, as though on reflection, he seems to have said to himself, "I cannot leave it there; there is something yet to be added. I must resolve it all into a personal application, a matter of personal love for the Lord proved by PRACTICAL devotion." So we have - in the first place -

"Lovest thou me more than these?" The challenge is made very personal and direct: not to ANY Simon, but to "Simon, son of John." He is penned down and is not allowed to be mixed up in a crowd of Simons. Then, it was THIS Simon who had protested that, whatever might be the failures of others, his love would be stronger and more reliable than theirs. "Lovest thou me MORE THAN THESE?" Doubtless many who read this, were they asked by the Lord if they loved Him, would be quite emphatic in their answer of "Yes!" But the Lord was evidently seeking an answer that was more than Simon was giving.

That is why He was so insistent. "Simon, you have protested that you do love Me; you have even gone as far as to say that you would out-love other people; but, Simon, Simon, really look into your own heart - do you? Why, under trial, when I was withdrawn from you and you were left alone, and everything seemed to have gone wrong and to have broken down and all your personal expectations and ambitions and visions had proved worthless, why did you say, 'I go a fishing'? as though you said, 'I am going to find some alternative to this kind of life, it is not satisfactory, it is so uncertain and there are so many difficulties, I cannot see the way, therefore I am going to make a way myself.'"

There was another of this group who took the course of despair, passive despair - I refer to Thomas. But Peter put his dilemma into a positive form and said, "I go a fishing." We may adopt different courses in our perplexity, in adversity, under trial. When the Lord hides Himself and we cannot see Him, or hear Him, and we do not feel that He is with us, He seems to be so far away and to have gone right out of our world, all we were expecting seems to have come to an end, and we do not know where we are, then we are prone to go some way that we choose for ourselves, and begin to take alternatives to steadfast love. It is a real challenge, it is a positive challenge, because these are experiences, these are tests, that the Lord allows. It is not a wrong thing to say that there are times when the Lord hides Himself, when the Lord lets us feel that we are left alone, when the Lord seems to close the heavens to us so that there is no to-and-fro communication, and when everything that we had looked for, expected and preached, seems to have come to an end and to have broken down, we are just left in what seems like ruins of everything; the Lord just does do that, and peculiarly does He do that sort of thing when He has people in view who are going to count. Take that, brothers, sisters! People who are going to count for Him go through deep experiences like that, and the object is to get them on to a basis which will make it possible for Him to use them. We will never be used unless we can stand on our feet in the storm. We are useless to the Lord if we go to pieces when everything around us, and in our spiritual life, seems to have come to a deadlock. If then we give it up, we are of no use to the Lord. The whole question of future usefulness to the Lord is based upon a love for the Lord which does not give up and say, "I go a fishing," "I take an alternative to following the Lord, I take an alternative to going on with the Lord because of the situation."

That is why the Lord came back, once, twice - "Follow me," "follow thou me." "You went back under trial, under testing - follow thou Me." And you have got to follow and go on following when you cannot see Him, when you do not know where He is, you have got to go on. These are the kind of people, and these alone, who will be used as Peter was. The basis of everything was that kind of personal love to the Lord Himself, not for what He was doing for Peter at the time, but for Himself. Oh, that is difficult - God only knows how difficult it is - to love Him for Himself when He does not seem to be doing anything for us at all. That is the challenge of love.

Really now, have we got very near to this? Love is something more than being a nominal Christian, bearing the name of Christian and going to meetings and taking up Christian work and all that. Love for the Lord is something very much more than that. The Lord says, "Lovest thou me?" I am not stopping with the different words that were used for "love". The Lord used one word, Peter used another. We will leave that aside. The challenge is this - "Lovest thou me?" What is the calibre, the quality, the content, of your love? "Lovest thou

me?"

THE PROOF OF LOVE

Peter answered, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." The Lord came back upon that declaration, imperfect as it was, for He Himself had used another word, the Lord came back and said, "All right, prove it." There was the challenge of love, and then the proof of love. "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." And where is the emphasis in that? The emphasis is upon "my" - MY lambs, MY sheep. Love is not for the ministry, love is not for the work in itself. Oh, we can love to preach, we can love to work, to be in the work. We can love the whole system of Christian organization, activity, and all that, and find a great deal of satisfaction in it and place for ourselves, but it is not that at all. It is not love for the ministry, not even for tending and feeding. There is an awful snare in that. The love lies in this, "Because they are Mine, just because they are Mine, and yours is a love for Me, anything that is Mine becomes the object of your love and your devotion and your activity." This is really a sifting out. You perhaps like to be in Christian work, you like to teach, to preach, to do things and you would say that it is for the Lord. But let us ask our own hearts, if it is because we really love that which is dear to the Lord, is that really the motive? Just because it is the Lord's, will we pour ourselves out, break our hearts over it, will we really shed tears because of genuine love for our Lord and what matters to Him? Is it like that? Why are you doing what you are doing, whatever it is, in relation to the Lord's things? Sheep and lambs can be very trying and cause us almost to despair, but love for the Lord and because they are His will keep us from giving them up.

Oh, I could break that up to apply it. I do not know what you are doing, but you may be doing various things. Where it is within the company of the Lord's people, you may be looking after the door and bringing the people in. You may be playing the instrument, you may be doing anything that people do in Christian work. Why are you doing it? Is it really out of a heart-love for the Lord, for the Lord HIMSELF, because this is the Lord's, or can it be put down to anything less than that - you have been persuaded or appointed to do it. Really are you doing it from the heart as unto the Lord? This is for the Lord consciously and deliberately, He puts everything on that basis. The proof of love is our concern for what is His. It is just His, and that is all there is to it. It is something that counts for Him, that matters to Him, and I need no other persuasion, no other coercion, no other urge or invitation. It is because it is the Lord's, and that is enough.

THE MASTERY OF LOVE

And then the mastery of love. "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." When thou was young - in other words - you did as you liked; when you get old, you are going to do what you would not have done then. And love is going to make you do a lot of things you would not have done before. It is something more than "like"; it is love. You are going to be mastered by another master than yourself and your own likes and preferences. You are going to do quite a lot out of love, because you are love-mastered, that you would never do otherwise. When love is the master, you are going ways you would never go otherwise.

Is not this something that discriminates between spiritual infancy and spiritual maturity? In effect, the Lord is saying here, "In spiritual infancy and immaturity, people always do as they like, as they want to do, as they choose. But when you get to spiritual maturity it is no longer what you want or the way you would go, it is the way the other Master says, the Master who is love." The day comes when you say:

"My Master, lead me to Thy door;
Pierce this now willing ear once more:"
"At length my will is all Thine own,
Glad vassal of a Saviour's throne."

That is a new kind of mastery. There has been service to the Lord, but this is something new, this is maturity. You notice that Paul said the very same thing in another way in 1 Cor. 13, "A more excellent way show I unto you. If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal," and on he goes with what might be, yet without love, and of it all being nothing, and then he goes on to the positive unfolding of the nature of true love. "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own..." and then, without a break, it is not another chapter on another subject, he says, "When I was a child I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child: now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things." Oh, love, mature love, true love, this love is not childish in its thoughts and ideas and ways, seeking its own. But mature

grown-up love, the love now of the man as against the child, is a different thing altogether from that. This is the love of the mature man that Paul is talking about, and it is his way, his lovely way, I was going to say - his clever way of just letting the Corinthians see that it was all childishness, this that was going on in Corinth. "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas" (1 Cor. 1:12). It is childishness and it is not love, and when you come to mature love, when you grow up, all that sort of thing will go. You will not be selecting your favourites, you will not be doing any of those things the Corinthians were doing.

When thou shalt become a man, thou shalt be under another mastery, and, although you will not like it, your flesh will shrink from it, you will even go to the cross. No man chooses that for his own fleshly comfort, he would shun it; but you will go to the cross. "Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify God." He would be so mastered that he would stretch forth his hands - Peter according to tradition was crucified - he would stretch forth his hands, he would be carried not the way he would like, but another way because of another master, the mastery of love, mature love, grown-up love.

Now this brings me to this point. The Lord does really need men and women to serve His ends. In many ways there is a need for more young men to come on in the ministry of feeding and tending. A lot of people have interpreted that "Feed my lambs" as Sunday School work. I do not believe the Lord meant that at all. The lambs in this case are not little children, although that may be your ministry and it may be included. You know, one of the most difficult things is to tend and minister to the immature, the spiritually delayed in their growth. But whatever it is, the Lord does need those who will serve Him in ministering to His own. Young men, He does! He needs you to preach the Gospel. He needs you to teach His people, to feed His people. There is a great need. Perhaps you have thought about it and perhaps you have desired it. Perhaps that is your will or your hope. But listen - the need is very great in all phases and directions of the Lord's work, He needs you; but the fact that the Lord needs you does not mean that you can do it, or that He can come now and call you into it and open the way for you. His need may be very great, and yet He may not be able now to open the way for you to come in to serve Him in meeting it. Why? It might be that you would come in on some other ground - to be a minister, to be a teacher, to be something; to study up the Bible and then pass on the fruits of your study. All sorts of things you might begin to do, and the Lord is waiting until your heart is broken over this whole situation, and it is such a heart-matter that you come to the place where you say, "Lord, the only justification of my life is that your interests are served." It must be a matter of heart-love for the Lord and for what is His, and not for the work, the ministry; not for anything but for your Lord and what is His. When you get there, and you are found upon your face before the Lord breaking your heart because you see He is not getting what He ought to have, when this becomes the travail of your soul, you will find the Lord will begin to do something. This is the necessary basis for the Lord to bring out His servants. That is what is here. You may come in the way to the place where you find it painful and not likeable at all, but that basic grip of the master-love will keep you going when everything would make you run away. When I see young men with ambition to be ministers, I quietly say inside, "The Lord have mercy upon them." This is something to be guarded against unless the Lord puts you in and holds you in. Do not have natural ambitions in the Christian realm, but ask the Lord for this love that will hold you in when you would give anything to run away.

You say, It is terrible to talk about Christian work like that! But, in a true spiritual realm, you meet forces that you would never have imagined existed. You meet hell when you are seeking to build the heavenly kingdom. Well, here again the Lord does need you. The need is there, He wants you. There is work for you to do and plenty of it. Oh, His people are hungry, His sheep need tending and feeding; they need guiding, counselling, instructing, and to be provided for, and the Lord wants you to be His under-shepherds. I am so glad Peter wrote his letter about the great Shepherd and the under-shepherd. Yes, He wants you, He needs you. Do not be mistaken about that. And if He is keeping you waiting, do not think it is because He does not want you, because there is no need. It is all there, clamant, pressing, but He must have you on this basis, nothing else will do - your own personal heart-love for Him that will not choose your own way or go anywhere because you like it. You will go against yourself altogether under the constraint of His mighty love.

THE CONCENTRATION OF LOVE

If I were to add another word, it would be this - connected with Peter's seemingly superficial reaction to this terrific thing. Suddenly seeing John following on he turned round. The Lord has said, "Follow me," and he immediately turns round, sees John and says, "Lord, and this man, what?" What I am going to say about it is not all it contains, but it is this, that you are going to be called, appointed, to your particular ministry. Others will be called to theirs and theirs may be different from yours, theirs may be in another realm altogether from yours. The Lord's servants are often characterized by a specific ministry. They have to recognize what that is and keep to it.

"Lovest Thou Me?"

Effectiveness depends upon concentration and avoidance of either distraction, diversion, or divided interest. There is something in the nature of rebuke in the Lord's rejoinder to Peter - "What is that to thee?" The whole statement seems clearly to mean that the Lord has sovereign rights to dispose of His servants as He wills, and they must not allow themselves to be diverted from what He appoints for them severally.

Love for Him must work out in giving oneself WHOLLY to THE thing to which they have been called. Superficially turning therefrom to what is not THEIR calling is itself contrary to love, it is fickleness.

Well, Peter learned this lesson, did his job, and glorified his Lord. He became a true shepherd. No one can read his letters without feeling his love for his Lord above all dividedness of heart. Love works out in faithfulness to the particular function, and faithfulness thereto unto the end - the long last proves the love.