

Vicarious Sacrifice: Three Categories of Love: Jesus Vets Peter after His Three Denials: *Agapáō* / *Philéō*, v. 15; *Agapáō* / *Philéō*, v. 16; *Philéō* / *Philéō* / *Ginóskō*, v. 17; Peter Instructed on How to Feed His Flock, John 21:15–17

John 21:15 - So when they¹ had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love [**present active indicative of the verb ἀγαπάω (*agapáō*)**] Me more than these [**other six disciples**]?” Peter said to Jesus², “Yes, Lord, You know that I love [**present active indicative of the verb φιλέω (*philéō*)**] You.” Jesus said to Peter, “Tend My lambs.” (NASB)

1. *Agapáō* is a customary present which inquires if Peter’s mental attitude is one of ongoing unconditional love.
2. In light of Peter’s recent three denials of knowing the Lord, the question is designed to determine if Peter’s love is less, the same, or greater than the love expressed by the other six men.
3. There are different levels of intensity between the two words for “love”: *agapáō* is less intense and sophisticated than is *philéō*.
4. To this Peter responds in the affirmative, but uses *philéō* instead of *agapáō*. Peter is offended by the Lord’s use of *agapáō*.
5. He does not claim to love the Lord more than his fellow disciples, but that his love for Jesus is greater than *agapáō*.
6. The aoristic present tense denotes an event that is now occurring. Peter claims his love for Jesus is more intense and sophisticated than *agapáō*.
7. Jesus knows that shortly Peter and the other disciples will soon be tasked with the responsibility of taking His message to both Jews and Gentiles.
8. To do this they must have an ongoing devotion and dedication to the mission which will be energized and maintained by a sophisticated love for Him.
9. To see where Peter is mentally, the Lord uses the less intense concept of love which is *agapáō*.
10. Peter’s response solicits the Lord’s mandate that concludes the verse: “Feed my lambs,” the present active imperative of the verb βόσκω (*bóskō*): “to feed sheep” literally, but metaphorically for teaching doctrine.
11. Those Peter will teach will not be sheep but **ἀρνίον (*arníon*)**: “lambs.” These would be new converts that must be dealt with patiently as they learn basic doctrines.

John 21:15 - So when the seven disciples had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love [***agapáō***] Me in a general, unconditional way more than these other six disciples do?” Peter said to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love [***philéō***] You in a far more intensive way than that.” Jesus said to Peter, “Teach basic doctrine to My baby believers.” (EXT)

¹ Seven disciples are gathered with Jesus at the Sea of Tiberius (Sea of Galilee): Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee: John and James, and two unnamed. See John 21:1–2.

² To avoid ambiguity, I use proper nouns in place of pronouns, where appropriate, from this point forward.

John 21:16 - Jesus said to Peter again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love [ἀγαπάω (*agapáō*)] Me?" Peter said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love [φιλέω (*philéō*)] You." Jesus said to Peter, "Shepherd My sheep." (NASB)

1. Jesus' second question leaves out "more than these other six disciples do." He simply asks Peter, "Do you love Me?"
2. The question is now asking Peter if his love is a mental attitude of basic unconditional love in light of his assertion at the Last Supper:

John 13:36 - Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later."

v. 37 - Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for you."

v. 38 - Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? I am telling you the truth, I say to you Peter, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."³ (NASB)

3. The Lord is almost at the point of the ascension and He wants Peter to certify to himself that he is ready and prepared to fulfill the prophecy "you will follow later" (v. 36).
4. Peter's love is far more advanced than at the Last Supper and the events that followed that fateful evening in Jerusalem.
5. Here on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Peter becomes frustrated by the Lord's continued use of *agapáō*.
6. For the second time Peter responds, "You know I love (*philéō*) you."
7. The verb "know" is the intensive perfect active indicative of the verb **οἶδα (*oída*)**. This is the emphatic method in Greek of presenting a fact or condition. It is the strong way of saying that a thing *is*.⁴
8. Its use indicates that Peter knows that the Lord knows for a fact that Peter loves Him intensively, i.e., *philéō*.
9. To this the Lord responds, "Shepherd My sheep." Here the verb is the present active imperative of **ποιμαίνω (*poimainō*)**: to perform the duties of a shepherd.
10. Those Peter is to shepherd are no longer lambs but sheep, the noun **πρόβατον (*próbaton*)**: sheep.
11. As new believers grow in grace they typically get the idea they know everything. They do not. Part of the duties of a shepherd is not only to feed the sheep but to also admonish them.
12. Peter is to address erroneous understanding or application of the sheep through rebuke and exhortation from the pulpit.
13. Many hardheaded sheep do not respond to the authority of the pastor and continue to function in the cosmic systems. Divine discipline is inflicted upon such individuals by the justice of God.

³ See John 18:15–27.

⁴ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1955), 202.

14. Others respond to the admonishments. They rebound, reorient, and refocus and then continue the process of advancing to maturity.

John 21:16 - Jesus said to Peter a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me in a general, unconditional way?" Peter said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You in a far more intensive way than that." Jesus said to Peter, "Lead, rebuke, and encourage My advancing sheep." (EXT)

John 21:17 - Jesus said to Peter the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love [φιλέω (*philéō*)] Me? Peter was grieved because Jesus said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, You know [οίδα (*oída*)] all things; You know [γινώσκω (*ginōskō*)] I love [φιλέω (*philéō*)] You." Jesus said to Peter, "Tend My sheep." (NASB)

1. Jesus now switches away from *agapáō* and uses Peter's verb *philéō*. He is satisfied that Peter has made the advance and can do the job.
2. A key indicator, other than his consistent use of *philéō*, is that Peter was "grieved," the ingressive aorist passive indicative of the verb **λυπέω (*lupéō*)**.
3. *Lupéō* is an ingressive aorist tense which is used to signify a state or condition and denotes entrance into that state or condition. Peter is frustrated, even aggravated, by the Lord's consistent posing of the same question, especially now that He uses Peter's verb for love.
4. The passive voice indicates it is the Lord's interrogation that has gotten to Peter causing his agitated response; the indicative mood certifies this condition as a fact.
5. This was the Lord's intent. In essence, His repetition of the question is designed to elicit whether or not Peter means what he says.
6. By going to the verb *philéō* in His second reiteration, the Lord wants to get into Peter's soul to elicit how Peter rally thinks.
7. Peter's response verifies the affirmative. He understands that Jesus is undiminished deity which he reveals with the statement, "Lord, You know all things."
8. The verb "know" is the present active indicative of **οίδα (*oída*)**: "to know intuitively":

Intuition. 5. The immediate apprehension of an object by the mind without the intervention of any reasoning process; immediate apprehension by sense.⁵

9. The knowledge possessed by the Lord is the foundation and origin of all that is known by us. What Peter recognizes is omniscience which is not limited in its knowledge of anything, therefore the neuter plural of **πᾶς (*pás*)**: "all things."
10. And among the things the Lord knows intuitively is the fact that Peter loves Him. But with emphasis on the Lord's true humanity, Peter uses another word for knowledge.
11. Knowledge learned over time by means of a process of observation, analysis, and reasoning is called **γινώσκω (*ginōskō*)**: "to know by observation."

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "Intuition."

12. As we have established from John 10, *ginōskō* is the category of knowledge that results in virtue love which Peter expresses for the third time as *philēō*, intensive love typical of the sophisticated spiritual life.
13. Peter is confirming that his use of *philēō* is authentic and real. In other words, "I am not blowing smoke."
14. To this the Lord responds, "Tend My sheep." "Tend" is the present active imperative of **βόσκω (*bōskō*)** which means to teach. It was used by the Lord in a similar command in verse 15, "Teach basic doctrine to My baby believers."
15. Here the congregation is referred to by the plural noun *prōbaton*: "teach my sophisticated sheep."
16. In verse 15, Peter is commanded to "Teach basic doctrine to My baby believers." In verse 16, "Lead, rebuke, and encourage My advancing sheep." In verse 17, "Teach My sophisticated sheep."
17. This is the process by which a pastor loves His congregation. He must study and teach in three ways: intersperse basic doctrines into the ongoing study for new believers; lead, rebuke, and encourage those who typically go in and out of the bubble; and, finally, keep pressing forward by instruction of advanced doctrines.