

# † The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

## **Submitting to the Savior**

### **John 13:36-38**

**36 Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.” 37 Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You.” 38 Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.”**

The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” The guests responded with phrases like, “Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir.”

It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, “I’m sure she had it coming.”

Sometimes we can certainly feel as though no one is really listening to us. We may be crying out for attention, we may be sending out all sorts of clues; or we may even be seeking to be as forthright as we can be only to have what we are saying seemingly fall on those proverbial deaf ears.

As we come to these final verses of John 13 we once again catch the sense that the disciples have not really understood what it was that Jesus was telling them concerning the extent of His love for them – a love that would take Him to the cross to bear their deserved punishment for sin. I can only imagine how *frustrating* it must have been for Jesus to both demonstrate and communicate His love and how this love would be manifested only to have His disciples not get it. And yet, one of the truths we can and must glean from our text, from this exchange between Peter, who is representative of the disciples as a whole, and Jesus is that Jesus continues to love them in spite of their failures, in spite of their fallings. For unlike Judas, Peter and the other ten disciples were truly **“His own”** (John 13:1) and nothing, not even the predicted and subsequent denial of Peter, or the scattering of the other disciples would mar the love of Christ for them. Truly it would be the love of Christ demonstrated through this episode of Peter’s denial and then his later restoration at the end of John’s gospel that inspired the truth of Romans 8:38-39 – a truth that we quote and sing, but let us allow for the moment its depth pierce deep into our souls causing us to rejoice:

**38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Not the enemy’s betrayal by the hand of Judas; not Peter’s bold and public denial; not the cowardice of Jesus’ soon to scatter disciples; and closer to home - not even your own failings, fallings and sins can separate, put asunder, rip you apart from the love of God which is in Christ

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Jesus our Lord. Of course the caveat, the qualification or stipulation to experience such a love is to be **“in Christ Jesus our Lord”** – that is to be related to Him by new birth, to have been met by the grace of God with the empowering of the Spirit of God to long to live to the glory of God. The requirement for experiencing this love of God is being as John 13:1 records, **“His own”** – as belonging to Jesus.

But our text this morning does reveal something interesting. It shows us how even those who belong to Jesus can become arrogant, thinking more of themselves than they ought; how they can become proud and overconfident to the detriment of their walk with Christ and yet how Jesus lovingly and relentless pursues, corrects, restores and keeps **“His own.”**

This pride and overconfidence of Peter in our text is really a mirror into which each of us may gaze this morning. For in each of us is this tendency of Peter - the propensity, this drive of our flesh to think of ourselves as having come so far with Jesus that we might now step out on our own and be assured that somehow we might know better than the Lord in some given situation. Beloved, as much as we profess to love the cross; as much as we proclaim that we desire to behold the cross; there are times when we, like Peter and the other disciples do not want to hear of Christ's death or gaze any longer at it because it shows us as we really are – failures, inept, unable, rebellious sinners who at the slightest opening seek our own way according to our own minds. *Beloved, every decision made apart from Christ is a look away from the cross.* Children, every lie, every devious thought, every mean word spoken to your parents or to your brothers or sisters is a turning away from the cross. Teens, every shortcut taken in chores or your increasing responsibilities, every lapse in integrity, that is doing what is right even when no one else is looking, is a refusing to behold the purpose of the cross. Spouses, every unkind word, every failure to strive to keep up in your God-given responsibilities and roles is an act of arrogance by which you say in effect that you refuse to be disciplined enough or diligent enough to honor your marriage God's way. Dear believer – every refusal to exercise your spiritual gifts in the body of Christ is a refusal to remember the cross of Christ. Obviously this list could go on and on – but suffice it to say that in our text then, we see Peter's arrogance and overconfidence as well as the response of Jesus, a loving response whereby He not only predicts Peter's failure as a result of confidence in his flesh, but also then sets the stage for Peter and for all of us to experience the loving restoration available to those who repent and submit themselves to the Lordship of Christ.

And so, I submit to you that from our three verses this morning we find three questions; two from Peter and one from Jesus Himself. From the two questions of Peter, I hope to show you questions we often ask ourselves in various forms; and then from the question of Jesus, I hope to challenge you to think about the status of your own relationship to Jesus, asking you if you are continually coming to Him humble and dependent or rather arrogant and independent.

## I. Question #1: “Lord, where are you going?” (13:36)

Remember back in verse 33, Jesus made the statement, **“Little children, I am with you a little while longer, You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’”** Now, here in verse 36, we find Peter disturbed by this statement. It is obvious that Peter and the other disciples did not understand what Jesus meant by this. For the past three years Peter and the disciples had been the constant companions of

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Jesus. Over the course of those three years, Peter's life as a fisherman has been turned upside down and so how could it be that Jesus would be going someplace that he could not go? What seemingly disturbed Peter is the sense that this friendship, this ministry, their being together was coming to some abrupt end. Do not forget that Jesus, Peter and the others have eaten together, traveled together, endured storms and hostility together; they had experienced miracles and other life-changing events. Was all this over? How could this be? And so, in typical bold Peter-like fashion the question is raised – **“Lord, where are you going?”** Or, if you would allow me a little freedom to paraphrase, “Lord, what are you talking about? We don’t understand? Haven’t we been faithful? Haven’t we proved ourselves to You – Why would you leave us now, where is it that you are going?”

I believe at the heart of this question is a subtle challenge to the *Lordship of Christ*. This is certainly not beyond the scope of Peter’s thinking. Let us look back to Matthew 16:16 (if you would turn there); to the great confession of Peter when he declared to Christ before the others, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”** But what happened right after that bold and confident assertion? Jesus foretold His own death to which Peter then rashly **“took Him aside and began to rebuke [Jesus] saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This [that is the sacrificial death for the sins of His people] shall never happen to You!’”** The death of Jesus for their sins was not computing with their own preconceived notions and hope that Jesus, as Messiah, was going to immediately set up the kingdom of God on earth and vanquish all of Israel’s enemies, thus fulfilling *at that time* all the promises to Israel. Both Peter and the other disciples were having a hard time submitting to the Lordship of Christ – that Jesus would do something unthinkable, outside the box and not consistent with their own thinking.

Now then, we don’t struggle with such things - do we? We never question the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. We never stumble over what it is the Lord is doing – do we? To be sure, the question we ask may be slightly different from that of Peter, but it is to the same effect. Rather than, “Lord, where are you going?” we ask, “Lord, where are You?” or “Lord, where have you gone?” We have those times when God seems far from us – those moments when we examine our lives and get frustrated that things are not seemingly unfolding the way we believe it should. We get that bad report from the doctor and ask, “Where are You Lord?” We find ourselves bickering or fighting with friends or loved ones and asked, “Where are You Lord?”

Let us be careful not to think we are above such questions. For even John the Baptist, the one filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother’s womb, the one empowered by God to prepare the way for the Lord; the one who pointed his own disciples to Jesus declaring Him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; the one who had the awesome privilege to baptize Jesus – this one certainly had his moments of God-glorifying trust. He knew who Jesus was. But what happened when John was imprisoned, when it didn’t appear to John that things were going as they should for himself or even for Jesus? In Matthew 11:2-3, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him a question; a question that has sometimes made me say out loud, “Are you kidding, John? How could you ask such a dumb question?” And yet a question that we are all capable of asking when things are not going our way. John asked, **“Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”** In other words, “I know that I once called you the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but it doesn’t appear to me based upon my situation that you may be him, shall we start looking for someone else?” It is a fancy

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way of say, “Lord, where have You gone? – for it no longer appears that You are around, that You are in control – that You can accomplish those things that concern me.” Have you ever felt like that? Not knowing what the Lord was doing, starting to question the Lord’s presence in your life; wondering why you have invested so much time and effort if the Lord was not going to be around to protect and comfort you? Maybe we don’t always ask the question as boldly as Peter – but every time we get lack in our pursuit of growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ; every time we fail to do things for the least of the brethren, to feed them, to give them something to drink, to invite them in, to cloth them, and visit them when they are sick or imprisoned, we are saying, “Lord, where have You gone?” We fail to serve Jesus by serving others because we don’t see the benefit or the blessing of Jesus in such service – we fail to be obedient and so we miss out on truly seeing the Lord.

The response of Jesus to this kind of question, “Lord, where are you going?” is simple and reassuring. However, it is so simple that it will not satisfy Peter. Jesus answers Peter’s question by saying, **“Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.”** Remember earlier, back in verse 33, Jesus told the disciples the same things He told the Jews, that where He was going, they could not come. Jesus told the Jews this back in John 8:21 where He said specifically, **“I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sins; where I am going, you cannot come.”** The implication of this verse is that they will want the salvation that comes from the cross without submitting to the Lord of the cross – they will therefore die in their sins, destined to the torments of hell for their refusal to acknowledge and to submit to Jesus as Savior and Lord and therefore will be unable to come into the blissful state of heaven. In John 13:33, Jesus tells the disciples that they cannot come to the cross – that is they cannot pay the penalty for their sin and live; but now in verse 36 Jesus tells Peter and so in effect every believer that after the cross, Jesus will ascend to heaven, and in God’s timing every believer will follow Him through the cross into the glories of heaven. This is the will of God – the will and command of Jesus. Jesus says to Peter – be calm, be assured, I have not left you without hope – you will follow Me later.

## II. Question #2 – “Lord, why can I not follow you right now?” (John 13:37)

It is easy to see in our text the rash impatience of Peter in this second question, **“Lord, why can I not follow you right now?”** He says in effect, “But Lord, I don’t want to wait and ! don’t think it is necessary that I wait even as you have said. You have it perfectly wrong, Jesus.” And then, a simple statement of Peter that reveals his vain overconfidence, he adds to his question, **“I will lay down my life for You.”** Doesn’t that sound noble? Should that not be the cry of every believer in Jesus Christ, “Lord, I will lay down my life for You?” But beloved, this is not a simple statement, but rather is an unqualified arrogant boast. The other gospels give us a bit more insight into this, so listen to what Matthew, Mark and Luke all record concerning this exchange:

**Matthew 26:33**

**But Peter said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”**

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## **Mark 14:31**

**But Peter kept saying insistently, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” And they all were saying the same thing also.**

## **Luke 22:33**

**But he said to Him, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!”**

Some might be tempted to read this and think that the disciples understood now that Jesus was going to the cross. I don't think so. I believe that Peter is simply overestimating his own strength. I see both Peter and the disciples saying here that no matter how far away Jesus might travel or how dangerous it might be, their highest priority, their deepest desire, is to stay at Jesus' side. Here then we find Peter unable to imagine anything that would separate them and so he asks, **“Lord, why cannot I follow you right now?”**

Beloved, it is not any easier for us to submit ourselves to the Divine will. It can be hard to acquiesce, to consent and give in. Why is this? Do we not want things to go as we have envisioned them and to proceed just as we have planned? While I do not see that the disciples understand exactly what it is that is about to take place to both them and the Savior, they are sharp enough to realize that something is not right – things are not going as they had hoped and Peter says in effect, “Okay Jesus, let's just do it – not Your own way of course; I know You just said something about not being able to come, at least for now, but that doesn't matter, I can handle this for You. You just trust in me and my abilities – we can take care of this together Jesus. And if You can't handle it Jesus, I most certainly can!” Oh such dangerous words to be uttered from the mouth of a child of God, “Lord, I can handle it!” But as soon as it seems that Jesus has disappeared; as soon as conflict, or harshness seem to prevail; as soon as the Church seems to be pulled apart by schisms, or by heresies; or as soon as it appears that others are not treating us the way we think they should; what happens? We become impatient. We chafe and allow ourselves the temper tantrum, stomping our spiritual feet as it were and say, “Lord, why? Why not what I want right now?” We struggle with submitting to the Savior but oh how we must learn that we might be spared the grief, that our testimonies of the glory of Christ might be undimmed.

### **III. Question #3: “Will you lay down your life for Me?” (John 13:38)**

This final question is truly the most piercing of all. It is not a question uttered by Peter, but rather asked by the Lord saying, **“Will you lay down your life for Me?”** This penetrating question stands in stark contrast to what Jesus has been communicating and will continue to communicate to Peter and the disciples, that it would be Jesus who actually lays down His own life for them. And then Jesus silences Peter and I mean absolutely silences Peter by making that well known prediction, **“Truly, truly [most assuredly and with all certainty] I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.”** I would have you notice that there is no recorded response from Peter. In fact, you might want to notice that Peter remains uncharacteristically silent from this point and is not spoken of again until John 18:10 when he strikes the ear of the high priest's servant with his sword. What was going through Peter's mind? Did he rehearse a possible retort? What would we have liked to hear him say? Perhaps

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something like, ‘Lord, You know I would lay down my life for you!’ But maybe then Jesus would simply have stared at him patiently in silence for him to revise the statement to something like, ‘Well, at least I would try, Lord.’ But the truth was painfully evident to Peter at some level so that the best he or any one of us could have honestly said in the face of such a prophetic utterance of Jesus is, ‘No, Lord, I’m not sure I would be able to lay down my life for You.’

So, how do you answer the question, **“Will you lay down your life for Me?”** In our own strength, according to our own wills, would we not also fail in this? How conditional our love for God tends to be. We are far more intent on receiving from the Lord than giving to Him. Our minds and hearts are so much more focused on ourselves and our needs rather than the glory of Jesus. Would we, faced with the opportunity, really lay down our lives for Jesus?

By asking this question, Jesus reveals to Peter his own pride and overconfidence. For this one who stood so brashly here before Jesus would shortly shrink in cowardice and despair because his confidence was not in what Jesus was doing for him but rather was in his own ability to do something for Jesus. But this question, as penetrating as it is to show us how we tend to trust in ourselves, also reveals the affection of our Savior. For the love of Jesus toward Peter, **“His own”** is not conditioned by the answer – and are we not grateful? In the words of 1 John 4:19, **“We love because He [Jesus] first loved us.”** Notice that Jesus does not follow up His question and prediction with a berating of Peter for his inadequacy. Jesus does not ask this question to induce guilt in Peter but I believe simply to reveal the truth – that even His own can be filled with pride and overconfidence. And Jesus does not send Peter away, or the other disciples who concurred with Peter, but rather He accepts His disciples’ sinfulness, as He does ours. Peter’s response is a surprise to Jesus but a given – man’s arrogance and independence when he really needs God, this sinfulness of pride is the very reason for which Jesus came.

There is a prayer found in the Anglican Common Book of Prayer (not that I am endorsing it or encouraging you to it) that reads, *“Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find You mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen”*

Jesus was revealing Peter’s weakness to himself and by this we ought to pray the prayer of Psalm 139:23-24 –

**23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.**

**“Will you lay down your life for Me?”** Beloved, everyday we are tempted to hold back. But let us be grateful that the love of Christ is not dependent upon our ability to answer that question. To be sure, He wants our love for Him to grow and our confidence in Him in any circumstance, life or death to abound. But know this, Jesus died for your sins – He laid down His life for you before you would even consider a positive response to such a question. What would be the last words of Christ to Peter that that would echo in his head upon seeing his Savior’s death on the cross – **“will you lay down your life for Me?”** Peter would be confronted with his own arrogance, haunted by his once held foolish notion that he could do something apart from

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Christ; and seeing that it would be Jesus who laid down His life for him. Have you seen this, sinner? You and Peter share the same God separating sin. But praise the Lord the story of Peter does not end in John 13 or even at his denial of Christ. In John 21, Jesus restores Peter by reminding him of His own great love for Peter. Jesus does not let Peter slip away but empowers the once headstrong, self-assured, overly self-confident Peter to be Jerusalem's eminent preacher of the gospel, a prominent leader in the church and the writer of two letters of the New Testament.

So then, the question is not so much to be will you lay down your life for Jesus, but more to the point, do you know that Jesus has laid down His life for you. Do you know that He paid the price for your deserved punishment for sin, as your Substitute so that you might no longer live for yourself, but for Him who died and rose again? Is the rest of your story a testimony of Jesus restoring, renewing, and regenerating you so that you might fellowship with Him?

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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