

## Emphasis in Language Study of John 21:15-17

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John 21:15-17 is one of the most common examples of eisegesis and misunderstanding of the Greek language. It is not uncommon to hear a pastor preach a message based on the two different Greek verbs for “love” that appear here. The first two times that Jesus speaks to Peter, He asks, “Do you love me,” using the verb **agapaw**. Peter responded two times, “I love you,” using **filew**. In His third questioning of Peter, Jesus used **filew** as Peter did in his response. Peter responded the same as the previous two times.

Generally, it is argued that **agapaw** indicates a higher degree of love. However, each time Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me,” he will only claim a friendship (**filew**) love. The New International Version adds to the confusion by translating **agapaw** as “truly love” and **filew** plainly as just “love.” Carson commented that the temptation to eisegete the passage in such a manner is unwarranted. He wrote, “. . . **agapaw** (*agapaō*) does not always refer to a ‘good’ love or a sacrificial love or a divine love, and certainly there is nothing in the root [**ajan**] to convey such a meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

A concordance search will show that John uses the verbs **agapaw** and **filew** synonymously without any distinction in meaning. Carson also understands the passage as “an example of semantic overlap, of synonymy.”<sup>2</sup> Bauer also translated **agapaw** and **filew** synonymously.<sup>3</sup> Mickelsen commented, “In a passage . . . where the interpreter finds a multiplicity of synonyms, it seems that these synonymous expressions are placed in close proximity to each other to re-enforce the basic idea.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, it is rare that the other subtle interchange of synonyms is observed. Jesus gave three responses to Peter: (1) **Boske talajrnia mou** (21:15); (2) **Poinaine tal probatavmou** (21:16); and, (3) **Boske talprobatavmou** (21:17). Carson wrote, “. . . it is rather strange to insist on a semantic distinction between the two words for ‘to love’ in this context, and not on small distinctions between other pairs of words in the same context.”<sup>5</sup> The basis idea of the passage is “sheep or lambs are to be cared for.”<sup>6</sup>

Peter was grieved not because Jesus changed his verb the third time he asked, “Do you love me?” Jesus’ threefold questioning was an obvious allusion to the threefold denial of Peter. By asking the same question three times, Jesus was indicating the priority of love for Him. In other words, He wanted the words of His disciples to match their actions. The best manner to show love for the Lord is by taking care of His lambs. Words are not enough if our actions are not one of obvious love for God as evidenced in love for others, especially those who belong to Christ.

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> William F. Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 4.

<sup>4</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (1963; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 127-128.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, *Fallacies*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, 128.