

Following Christ

Gospel of John

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Let me invite you to look with me in your Bibles to John 21. I've entitled this particular message "Following Christ." I know that's a title that seems to be very popular in Christendom; you hear many preachers, perhaps, announcing that particular title but what we're going to find in this particular message is that following Christ is not a simple thing nor is it an easy thing. We live in a day of easy believism where people are being told, "Just look to Christ. Just have faith in Christ. Just follow Christ, that's all you have to do. Just follow him." Well, by the time we're done today, you're going to understand and I'm sure if you're already the Lord's you already know this, that unless he keeps you, you would be one of the first to go your own way. Unless he is that faithful Shepherd that continues to draw you, unless he has paid your sin debt and for that reason owns you, you will end up just like many who for a time appeared to follow Christ but in the end, went their own way. I pray that is not the case of any here, but reality is that it probably is, even in a congregation as small as this. We tend to think of people out there as that applying to them, but every one of us sitting here is challenged by this word, myself included and I pray that the Lord would grant us his Spirit.

Let's read this in John 21 and I'll begin in verse 15 because this was where our Lord pulled Peter tenderly aside and here we see the Shepherd drawing one of his own back to himself, one who had fallen. One whose sin, when you look at it, was no different than Judas Iscariot because both denied the Lord, both betrayed the Lord, and yet with a different outcome. You say, "Well, was it because Peter finally got it and pulled himself up by his boot straps and realized he'd better get things right and looking again to the Lord?" No. We're going to see where it was the Lord, himself, that said, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." This is the Christ who keeps his sheep.

This is the Christ of whom Bob just read for us in John 10, he'll not lose one for whom he has paid the debt. How different this Christ that we're about to read about here that is tenderly, after his death, after his resurrection, the Shepherd was smitten, the sheep were scattered but here we have Christ tenderly bringing back, drawing back to himself every wandering sheep. And he's not a buddy. He's not an advisor. He's not an expert on Christian living. He's the Shepherd and he is, yes, a friend of sinners, not the righteous, he didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. He's their advocate. He's

their Redeemer. He's their substitute. You say, "Well, how could Peter ever hope after what he did to stand before God one day?" Well, in his substitute because this one who called him and speaks to him and addresses him here in these verses is his defender before God's law and justice, just as he is the defender of every one of his own. I find comfort in that.

So, we read, John 21:15,

"So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, 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? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, 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. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him," and here's the title of the message, "Follow me." Following Christ. "Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?" referring back to his time with them before he went to the cross, "Peter seeing him," and we know that was John who even is writing this epistle, "saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? This is the disciple which testifieth of these things." In other words, John himself. "And wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true."

As I considered this particular portion of Scripture, I find my own heart humbled because I know how many times I have wandered and I know how many times I have failed the Lord. I heard this morning someone saying that there are four words we all need to learn to say in life and that is, "I'm sorry" and "thank you," and I think about that in terms of how it is that if God were to mark iniquity, who could stand and all that I can ever say unto the Lord if I were to give an account is "I'm sorry but thank you. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you for your grace. Thank you for your love. Thank you for never leaving me to myself. Thank you that I can even stand here today and declare a testimony unto these people that have come here today and God help me, I'm sorry if I get in the way, but if somehow God will communicate a word to one of his sheep, thank you, Lord. Thank you Lord."

I believe this is how the Lord directs. I'm thankful that there's a song that I know in grace circles is pretty popular and I've sung it until I started thinking about the words, this matter of coming to Christ, it says,

“Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor a thought of fitness fondly dream.
All fitness he requires,
Is to feel your need of him.”

But then I got to thinking: you know, even if the Lord would require as a fitness that I feel my need of him, he'd have to cast me into utter darkness and into eternal condemnation. I'm not even sure, right now standing before you, that I could say I truly feel and sense my need of him. In fact, that's the coldness of this heart and I'm thankful that the Lord didn't even hang that condition over Peter and say to him, “Well, Peter, I've got some things to show you, I've got some grace to give you but first I need you to feel your need of me.” Had that been the condition, Peter could never have followed Christ; he would never have come. Thankfully, the Lord does not wait for the sinner to make things right and approach unto him first but, rather, he comes to the sinner and that's what I see here with regard to Peter. This is our Lord upon completion of his death and accomplishing that work of salvation, for these such as Peter was.

He had scattered; he'd gone a-fishing and it was the Lord who came to him but it was just as the Lord said he would when he spoke to them in John 14:18. He said, “I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.” And if there's any testimony that anyone of the Lord's can declare as to why they're even following Christ, that would be it: that he came to me. This is the Shepherd who came and sought this lost sheep and took him up on his shoulders and brought him back to the fold, otherwise, I would never have followed him. Had Christ said even, “Here, I'm going to put you down and I'm going to walk ahead of you and you follow me.” I would have been too weak. I remember as the Lord first began to open my heart and I read the commands to believe on him, my cry was, “I can't.” When I read the commands to repent, “I can't, but, Lord, if you will. If you will grant that faith to believe, if you will grant that repentance to look to Christ, all the power is in who you are and what you accomplished.”

I want to come back here to John 10 that Brother Bob read because this is important here. If you were to ask me and if you got nothing else out of this message even before we get into John 21, just feeding on what Bob read for us in John 10, we see here clearly set forth why any sheep do follow Christ and not another. In verse 3 it gives us the answer, it's because there is a distinctive call that the Lord addresses to his own and we find even our Lord directing Peter this way. As the Lord showed that path in which he would lead Peter through his life and said to him “follow me,” what's the first thing that Peter did? He turned about him and said, “Well, what about this guy?” That's the way we are; we all have spiritual ADD. We've got our eyes on everything and everybody but the Shepherd and the Lord came back with a pretty straight-forward answer: if I will that he tarry til I come, what is that to thee? This time he said to Peter “follow thou me.”

That's that distinctive call of why one follows the Lord and another doesn't. There is, as he says here in verse 3 of John 10, "To him the porter openeth; and," what? "The sheep hear his voice." It's because the porter opens, "and he calleth his own sheep by name and leadeth them out." So, if any one of us today knows Christ and is following him, it's because he has known me, he has known us and he has addressed that distinctive call to follow him.

Then, down in verse 11 and 14 is a second reason. There not only is a distinctive call but a distinctive Shepherd. He's not everybody's Shepherd. He said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." Don't you suppose that if something was so vital that it required Christ to give his life in order to obtain them for himself that he would have every one for whom he died? He says he will because verse 14 says, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep," actually "sheep" is in italic. "I know those that are mine," would be a way of reading that. "And am known of mine." So, that's why they follow him: it's because of his righteous life and sacrificial death which purchased them, thereby he, himself, is going to gather every one of them.

The third reason they follow him we find in verse 16 and it's a distinctive grace. A distinctive call, distinctive Shepherd, distinctive grace. "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold." In other words, not just Jewish but Gentile, "them also I must bring, and," what? "They shall hear my voice." It takes the distinctive grace of God to hear the voice of the Shepherd. But I like the way it's put: "they shall hear." It is a distinctive and effectual grace. "And there shall be one fold, and one shepherd."

There are church organizations, I say "church" but religious organizations, trying to get people united and together. Well, in Christ's church, they're already one because the Lord has made them so. There is one shed blood which has purchased their part and there is one righteousness that he earned and established, that God accepted and imputed to their account upon completion of the death of his Son. All of that, in time the Spirit draws them into one fold. One Shepherd it says there, but then down in verse 26, why is it that any follow Christ or there is that distinctive election? Notice it says in verse 26, "ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

Now, don't get those words backward in verse 26. He does not say in reaction, "Okay, then, you're not my sheep because you won't believe on me." That's how preachers present it. They say, "If you don't believe on Christ, then he's going to reject you. You're not his sheep." That's not what it says. It says, "Ye believe not because you're not of my sheep." In other words, if God leaves sinners to themselves because they're not sheep, they'll never believe. I'm not trying to make sheep out of goats. I'm not trying to get reprobates to hear the voice of Christ. I'm not trying to do anything. All I have to do is declare Christ, exalt him before the ears of the people. The Lord knows those that are his and he says that: his sheep hear his voice. It says, "I know them." That's not even the under-shepherd's job to try to figure out who they are. Christ knows them and they follow him because of that. That's a distinctive elections and that's the only thing we can

say when it comes down to it: if I follow Christ and continue to follow him until he's pleased to take me from this world, it's because it's been his work from beginning to end. That's the only thing that distinguishes me from anybody else in this world.

Come back here to John 21 and let's just look together for a few moments at what it is to follow Christ. Remember, this is where I told you in the beginning, this is where it gets tough. A message such as this might just be a dividing line. I've seen it happen in the past. People get upset and they think, "If that's your definition of a sheep or what it is to follow Christ, then I'm out of here." Well, it's not my definition. I trust that everything that I have to say to you in this message is taken right from this Word. And, yes, there is a dividing even as we saw in John 10. There, when the Shepherd came to that fold, it was described in a general fold in the village where everybody came and mixed their sheep and goats and everything in the same place and when the Shepherd came, he called out his own. He brought them out; there was a dividing. I believe that's the way it is every time the gospel is clearly set forth: there is a dividing. There was a dividing with Christ. He said, "I didn't come to bring peace, but a sword." But that's how he's purposed it.

What is it to follow Christ? First of all, it's to be drawn to him by his grace and by the merits of his death on behalf of sinners. The word "follow" here in John 21 and that's what I want us to focus on. Before we get too far, we've got to define what it is. You notice in verse 19, he said "follow me." And again in verse 22, "follow thou me." The word "follow" simply means "to come after one who precedes." You can't lead; we don't see here the Shepherd chasing the sheep, but calling them and they follow him. They join him; they are brought into his company. That's what it is to follow.

So, it's based on him drawing them even as we saw in John 10. He comes to the sheep. He calls them. He pays their sin debt. He draws them unto himself. That's why he said "my sheep hear my voice." He's the forerunner. Christ has gone before and you think about what it is to follow Christ, it's to follow him into glory. I haven't been there and yet as I stand here, I have a hope of glory. In speaking to you, you say, "Well, on what basis?" Well, on my forerunner who has gone within the veil, the veil of his flesh and has paid the way and has ascended on high and the Scriptures say that "everyone for whom he paid the debt is seated with him in the heavenlies." And so, it's as if this whole train follows him by his living, by his dying and by his raising again and his ascending on high.

Look in John 12:32. Everything I have to say to you about following Christ starts and ends with this truth, this foundation: that any that he draws to himself is by his grace and by the merits of his blood alone and by his righteousness alone. It's not man's decision to follow. This is Christ leading, Christ accomplishing, and his sheep, then, following. There were many after Christ raised from the dead. He didn't go around showing himself to the public, he appeared unto these for whom he had paid the debt and drew them to himself. It speaks of grace to them and this is what he said in John 12:32, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men," and "men" is in italic. "All" relates back to those for whom he died. "I will draw all of them unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die."

That sounds pretty effectual, doesn't it? What is my hope of following Christ to glory? It's not how well I followed him; it's not how well I thought about him; it's not how well my faith has been fixed upon him because if that were the condition, I'm so far behind I can't even see him. And if you're honest, you'll say the same thing. But it's the fact that he has led the way. It's the fact that he is now seated in glory and even as he said, "If I be lifted up, I will draw each one unto myself, each one for whom I have paid that debt." That's pretty clear, isn't it? I know some people argue and say, "Well, then that takes it out of my hands. I don't think that's fair. I think I ought to have something to do with it." Well, have at it. Let's see how well you do. That's why I said this is not simple but I'll tell you, it's clear because it's all founded upon the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In a few minutes we're about to partake of his elements that he's left us to remember him by: the bread and the wine. That's not a light thing. What is declaring? Those who partake of it are declaring that he led the way. He's the forerunner, I'm the beneficiary. When I partake, I'm saying it's all in his blood and righteousness. Apart from that, I have no hope. So, that's the first thing that we find as to what it is to follow Christ. It's to be drawn to him; it's to have him as that substitute; the one who paid the debt.

Secondly, and here is where it gets tough because we're so used to men breaking contracts today and they say one thing and then down the line they turn the tables on you and the next thing you know, you're sitting there thinking, "Well, what did that contract have to do with it?" They break their word. This matter of following Christ is till death do us part. Till death do us part. Here in John 21:18 the Lord is reminding Peter when he says, "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest." That's speaking of youth and energy and vibrance, but then he says, "but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." He talks about the aging process.

So, he said, "This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God." By what death. In other words, he's preparing Peter for an eventual death but at the same time, he says, "And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me." You know, don't worry about how and when and where. I think a lot of times we waste our time mulling these things, "Well, I wonder where I'll be when my day comes. I wonder if I'll be able to endure. I wonder if God's grace will be there when I need it." All of that is unbelief that fills our heart and causes us to question. What does the Lord say? Follow me. Follow me. From young to old, from strength and self-confidence to weakness. I find that even in myself that the older I get, the weaker I become, the less presumptuous about life. I don't feel like I've been able to whip it or win it or lick it. It's having a pretty good toll on me but I just know that I'm here as long as the Lord has purposed and that's what he was telling Peter.

You know, the thing is, we should never put any confidence in our flesh. We've all seen stories of that runaway player in football that gets down toward the end and starts getting cocky and waving and spikes the ball before the end zone and it all gets called back. You know, this matter of following Christ, I know it's him that keeps us but we have to

remember that this is till death do us part. This battle is not over until this body is laid in the grave. This flesh will be a constant enemy to our souls and our thinking and continue to haunt us until we die. And maybe when we're younger, we kind of self-confidently feel like, "Alright, bring it on! I got it!" But the older you get and the closer you get to that time when you realize the Lord is going to take you from this world, you realize that unless the Lord keep me, because that's what he's telling Peter. He said, "Peter, you were pretty cocky back there before my judgment and my death saying you'd follow me wherever. Well, here's the way it's going to be, Peter. You're going to grow to a ripe old age." Isn't that what it says there? "But there's coming a day when you're going to have to stretch forth your hands and another gird you and hold you up and carry you whither you wouldn't go otherwise."

Look with me in Ecclesiastes 12. I debated whether even to come over here because there is so much here but I believe it's important. This is exactly what the Scriptures tell us about what it is to get old, what it is to age and I hope this is some encouragement. You know, there may be a day when I won't recognize any of you. If the Lord causes me to live to a ripe old age, that may well be describing me, to where another has to carry me about and I'll be a blithering idiot. I may not even remember anything about the gospel. Have you ever thought about that? If the Lord ever took away your mind? What if your salvation depended upon you keeping your eyes on him until the end? Well, you'd have reason to fear, wouldn't you? I would.

And that's what the Lord is saying to Peter, "Just follow me." In other words, "I am your sustainer. I am your substitute. I am your shepherd. I am your advocate." Because there is going to come a day when you won't be able to do anything about it and that's what we see here in Ecclesiastes 12. "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." I don't see that word "Creator" just in the sense of having been born in this world. If I'm the Lord's, he has created within me that life to know him. "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." You say, "What is he talking about? Evil days?"

I can remember one of my good friends as he passed 80 and started living on down through 90 and who I'd have frequent conversations. The Lord mercifully took him after he was 86 years old, but I can remember him saying to me, "You know, this business of growing old is an endeavor." And I'm thinking, "You're like 40 years ahead of me." Every day is a challenge and I can remember discussing this particular portion of Scripture with him. What are these days of evil in which we'll have no pleasure in them? Well, he uses symbolic language. He says, "While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened." In other words, as you age you're not as brilliant as you were. The light of the sun, stars, "nor the clouds return after the rain." It's talking there about one trouble after another. "In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble." Again, that's symbolic language. The keeper of the house? You think about your body, that's the legs you stand on. Right now I'm feeling pretty good. I can jump up and down but when those keepers of the house begin to tremble, which if we live long enough, that's what's going to happen. It's what the Lord was saying to Peter, "you're going to stretch out your hands and another is going to carry you."

“And the strong men shall bow themselves.” What is it that keeps you from bowing? Is it your back? Isn’t it all those bones in your back? Mess with them and all of a sudden you begin to bow. Now, this one’s an easy one, “and the grinders cease because they are few.” That’s all those beautiful pearly whites in your mouth. They start disappearing one at a time. It’s like the man that ended up with just two left in his mouth, one up on top and one on the bottom, but he thanked God at least they met so he could chew. “And those that look out of the windows be darkened.” You’ve got it, it’s eyesight. I’m facing that right now with these glasses on. I don’t like them but I’ve found that if I don’t put them on I can’t see.

Verse 4, “And the doors shall be shut in the streets.” Think about the door of your body, what is it? It’s this mouth and it’s shut in the streets. In other words, difficulties speaking. “When the sound of the grinding is low.” Hearing gets poor. Stop and think about that. You have the privilege right now of hearing the gospel but what if the day comes when the hearing becomes so poor I cannot even hear a man that stands up and declares it? What will be my case then? Will I stop following Christ for that? It says, “and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird.” Trouble sleeping. I’ve talked to many people that said that it’s amazing, you go to bed tired but you can’t sleep. The slightest noise and you’re awake. “And all the daughters of musick shall be brought low.” Depression. Daughters of music: anything that you played initially to make you feel better, everything brought low.

It’s describing what we are in this flesh, dear folks. That, again, did you really want following Christ to depend upon you remaining strong? No, I need a strong Savior. I’ll go ahead and confess it right now. I need a strong deliverer. I need a strong advocate. I need one who will answer for me. For it says, “when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way.” Fear of everything. You would think that the older you get, the less you would fear if you were really growing in grace and knowledge of the Lord but here it’s saying that it’s the nature of this flesh to fear. And when all the pretense and mask is removed, ultimately that fear would overcome us where it not for the Lord keeping us. It says, “the almond tree shall flourish.” The almond tree puts out white blossoms so it has to do with graying hair. “And the grasshopper shall be a burden.” Think about a grasshopper being a burden. Well, no strength. Again, coming back to Peter, a day is coming when someone is going to carry you about, Peter. No strength. “Desire shall fail.” That’s desire for anything whereas before you’re up and going and running. Desire fails “because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.” In other words, death approaches. Death approaches.

“Or ever the silver cord be loosed.” There, again, talking about what sustains this body like a silver cord broken. “Or the golden bowl be broken.” Think about what’s in this mind and all that it contains and yet there comes a time when it’s of no use. No use. “Or the pitcher be broken at the fountain.” That’s kind of a funny thing but Scripture deals with everything. That’s basically having problems going to the bathroom. You can’t hold yourself anymore. The Scriptures lay it all out there. “Or the wheel broken at the cistern.” The wheel, that which is the gear that works the heart and all the organs and everything that works together now, nothing is functioning. What is it? It’s death.

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” That’s our end and that’s what is described here. Coming back to my text in John 21, this is why I say, it ain’t over til it’s over. This is a matter that the Lord said that is till death do us part. And I will tell you this: just like Christ said “what the Lord has not planted will most certainly be uprooted.” There are many people I’ve seen that while they are feeling good and while things are going well, it’s easy to sit here and embrace this gospel but when the Lord begins to bring trouble, it could be through aging, could be through opposition, could be through other things, they melt and they go away. You say, “What about them?” Well, if they’ve truly gone away, they never were the Lord’s. They never were the Lord’s.

In Peter’s case, as you come back here to John 21, I’ve got to wrap this up, we’ll come back to it, but in verse 19, there are some that even see in this not just his growing old, it says “thou shalt be old” up in verse 18, but some believe the stretching forth of the hands and another girding him and carrying him where he would not, refers to the type of death that he would die and that is for identifying with the gospel. In tradition history speaks of him having been crucified on a wood just like our Lord was and some of the writings say that although when that time came, he was nailed to that cross, he refused to die as our Lord died and he asked to be crucified upside down so that none would think that in any way, his death would rival that of the Lord’s. But if that is even the case, we know that it wasn’t Peter, it wasn’t anything in him but it was the Lord still leading the way even through that. “Thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” what? “I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

That’s our only hope and truly to follow him is not us hanging on to him, it’s him keeping us. Is that your hope? I trust so.