

“Follow Me”

John 21:20-25

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” ²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

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- John 21:20-25, ESV

This morning brings us to the end of our time together in the Gospel of John. And as Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” It’s been a sweet time in John’s Gospel, and we have learned much together. This book has such wonderful depths and such beautiful truths about Jesus; I know I have been blessed by our time together in this great Gospel. And so, as our time draws to a close this morning, we’re a bit sad to be saying good-bye, even as we trust that God will continue to speak to us, teach us, and build us up in the faith through other portions of His holy word.

It is fitting that our time in John draws to a close with a final scene featuring Jesus, Peter, and John. These three men are at the heart of this Gospel, and yet the focus is clearly and powerfully on Jesus Himself. John clearly identifies himself as the author of the Gospel, even though he never writes his own name into his testimony of the Son of God.

I. What Is that to you? Follow Me!

Jesus has been talking with Peter, lovingly drawing him to a sorrow of repentance and restoring him to his ministry calling. At the end of verse 19, Jesus has said to Peter, “Follow me,” words that apparently had a double-meaning when He spoke them. Jesus was calling Peter to resume his life of discipleship, a life of following Jesus as a fisher of men and not returning to his boat and nets. But also, it seems that Jesus gets up at this point and walks away from the breakfast fire, and Peter rises to follow Jesus in a walk along the seashore.

Peter has just been told that he will die a martyr’s death and will glorify God by his death. Now, as Peter follows Jesus, he turns around and sees John following both of them. Seeing his friend, and perhaps concerned for him, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Many people have speculated about Peter’s motivation here. Was Peter jealous of John’s close relationship with Jesus? Was he concerned for John and wanting some reassurance from Jesus? Was he perhaps concerned that he would have to die alone and he wanted to know if John was going to be with him at that dark hour? We don’t know. Such questions are speculation, and one of the lessons of this passage is to teach us how distracting and unhelpful speculation is.

God doesn’t tell us everything, and that’s a very good thing. I was listening to a sermon by John MacArthur last week, and he said, “For God to explain the why to us would be like trying to pour the Atlantic Ocean into a

Dixie Cup. Instead, he tells us not why but what.” How true! And so often we think we want to know why, don’t we?

We’re also interested in knowing all sorts of things that aren’t really our business. Peter wanted to know what the future held for John. That was none of his business. But here’s what’s comforting for us in the midst of this exchange: Jesus knew exactly what He had planned for both Peter and John, and Jesus knows exactly what He has planned for us. We do not know the why and we do not know the yet-to-come; we know what we’re called to do in the here and now, today. We are called to follow Jesus.

Yet we know that God knows the why and God knows the not-yet. He knows it all perfectly. He orders the why according to His purposes. He is working out His plan for His reasons, reasons we are not told, but reasons we can trust are as wise as they are loving. God has the future in His hands, and we do not have it in ours. If I had to trust my future to my care or to God’s, I know myself well enough and I know God well enough to know my future is much better in His hands.

So, we can praise God with David in Psalm 139, saying:

*For you formed my inward parts;
 you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
 in your book were written, every one of them,
 the days that were formed for me,
 when as yet there was none of them.
 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
 I awake, and I am still with you.*

- Psalm 139:13-18, ESV

No, Jesus didn’t tell Peter what John’s future held for him. Jesus only told Peter about his own future because Jesus perceived that Peter needed to be strengthened and encouraged as he resumed the call to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is what really matters for Peter, and that’s why Jesus answers the way He does: “*If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!*”

Jesus did not want Peter focused on what events might or might not be coming, but on his duty. In his commentary on this passage, Matthew Henry says:

"The great thing that is all-in-all to us is duty, and not event; for duty is ours, events are God's - our own duty, and not another's; for every one shall bear his own burden - our present duty, and not the duty of the time to come; for sufficient to the day shall be the directions thereof: a good man's steps are ordered by the Lord (Ps.

37:23); he is guided step-by-step. Now all our duty is summed up in this one: following Christ. We must attend His motions, and accommodate ourselves to them, follow Him to do Him honour, as the servant his master; we must walk in the way in which He walked, and aim to be where He is. And, if we will closely attend to the duty of following Christ, we shall find neither heart nor time to meddle with that which does not belong to us."

But what does it mean to follow Jesus? Matthew Henry describes it well, but how do we do it? Three things are involved in following someone: Focusing our attention on them, listening to them, and seeking to obey them. We must focus our attention on Jesus. We can't follow Him if we're going through our days and weeks with no focus on Him. We must pray to Him, give thanks to Him, seek Him in His word, and live aware of His abiding presence by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We must also listen to Him, and He speaks to us through His word, as illumined and applied to us by the Holy Spirit. It is not the Word of God alone, without the help of the Holy Spirit, and it is not the Spirit alone, whispering in some secret language apart from the Word. It is His Holy Spirit speaking through His Word. And when we hear, we must then obey. How can we obey? Only by the strength that the Holy Spirit supplies, and so we must pray for the ability to obey and then give Him thanks and praise when we have been able to obey, for it is His Spirit's work and not our flesh's strength which allows us to truly obey.

2. The Testimony is True

John then clarifies that a rumor which had circulated about him for years was not true:

²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

In these two verses, 23 and 24, we are given strong confidence in the testimony of Holy Scripture and not in human tradition. John writes this Gospel probably in the late 80's or perhaps early 90's. Jesus had this conversation with Peter and John on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the year 29 or 30. Peter had lived for more than 30 years after this conversation, but he had died probably 25 years before John wrote his Gospel.

"The saying spread abroad among the brothers" is a reference to a rumor that had been widely circulating and accepted by many in the church, based on this conversation. This is kind of how church tradition works – stories circulate widely among the churches based on historical things that happened. But just because tradition comes from real history doesn't mean it always accurately reflects real history. Church tradition can be very unreliable.

What is not unreliable is the testimony of the Holy Spirit given to us in the written Word of God. John is relating this story to us himself in this Gospel not to draw attention to himself; he works very hard not to do that. His purpose is to strengthen our confidence in the truth of his testimony. He is not passing along a rumor he heard; he was there, every step of the way, as one of Jesus' closest followers.

I should be clear about a couple of things here, while I'm emphasizing how much more reliable Scripture is than church tradition: We don't know for sure when Peter died or exactly how he died. We know from the testimony of Scripture here that Peter died in a way that glorified God. We can read between the lines a bit and conclude that Peter had probably died already by crucifixion by the time John writes his Gospel. Tradition tells

us that Peter was killed in October of 64 AD by being crucified upside down, but we can't be 100% sure. We can be fairly sure that he was crucified, and that it likely took place under the persecution of the church in Rome by Nero in 64 AD, but whether or not it was upside down is less certain.

What is 100% certain is that John's testimony here in his Gospel is fully reliable. He has told us the truth about who Jesus is, why He came, what He did, and how we need to respond to Him. John's testimony is true, as is the testimony of all of Scripture, and we can depend on it and should respond obediently to it.

3. The Testimony is Sufficient

And yet John doesn't tell us everything, does he? I told you I believe John's Gospel was written at least 20 years after the other three Gospels, at a time when John was the last living Apostle. Many people believed John would live until Jesus returned, but I think John knew better. He knew the Lord was going to call him home and leave the church without a physical, personal Apostolic presence, and so he wrote his Gospel to complete the other three, not repeating much of what it is the other three and instead focusing on giving us new information.

As John closes, he says: "*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*"

John is telling us that more could be written, but he's also letting us know that more is not going to be written, at least not under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because no more needs to be written. At the end of the previous chapter, John gave us his definitive purpose for writing what he did as he did:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31, ESV)

Jesus healed many people and did many great things. Jesus taught many wonderful things for years. It would be nearly impossible to write it all down. Consider just two verses from Matthew 4, verses 23-24 –

²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them.

Think of all of the synagogues in Galilee where Jesus preached. We don't have most of those sermons recorded for us. Think of the hundreds and hundreds of people He healed. We only have the stories of a few. And yet, while the testimonies we have in the four Gospels are not by any means comprehensive, they are completely sufficient. John is letting us know that nothing more is going to be written or needs to be written, even as he tells us that whole world could not contain the books that could be written to record every detail of everything Jesus said and did.

Of course, you may know that the Gospel of John was not the last book to be written and called a Gospel. Starting about 25 years after the Gospel of John was written and continuing for the next 100 years or so, several so-called "Gospels" were written, including the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Phillip, and the Gospel of the Twelve. What are we to think of these Gospels? Well, when the Gospel of John was written, John was the last living Apostle. None of these other books could possibly have been written by the people whose names are attached to them. They were created by a heretical sect that split off from Christianity called Gnosticism. Many people

like them today because they offer a different way to respect and honor Jesus without really following Him as a Christian.

John's Gospel ends with a finality that is not as strong as the finality which ends Revelation, but nonetheless makes it clear enough that John's was the last true Gospel that would be written or that would need to be written. With the four Gospels, we have a complete record of all we need to know in order to believe in Jesus for salvation and to follow Him. The rest of the New Testament unfolds for us more clearly what it means for us to follow Jesus as His people in this world.

When we say the Bible is sufficient, we don't mean that it answers all of our questions. It doesn't. Sometimes you hear people talk about the Bible as God's Answer Book or God's Guide to Life or God's Instruction Manual for Life. But it's not. It's more important than that. The Bible is not a book that is primarily about you. It's about God and His plan of salvation for His people, culminating in Jesus. Jesus is the main character of the story of Scripture, and everything points us to Him.

Does the Bible tell us how we should live our lives? Yes, in the most important sense, but not in the sense that some people think. The Bible is not a good guide to retirement planning or educational choices or professional advancement. In the Bible, God reveals Himself to us so that we will believe in Him and He shows us how to live life in fellowship with Him as His redeemed people, as His children.

So, the Bible is sufficient, as the only authoritative guide for our Christian faith and practice. We don't need other books to show us more about God or about how to trust Him and follow Him. Other books may help us understand the Bible, but they cannot add to it. They can help us in areas not directly addressed by Scripture, and they can help us reason well from the Scriptures to other areas of our lives, but they can never take the place of the Bible as God's completely sufficient self-revelation.

How Will You Follow Jesus?

The most important question for all of us as we wrap up our time in John's Gospel is how will we respond to the call of Jesus saying to us, "Follow Me"? Will we believe in Him and receive life in His name? Will we fix our attention on Him, listen to Him, and obey Him?