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“Follow Me” John 21:18-19

Intro: As we are making our way through the last 2 chapters of John’s Gospel, we have discovered several layers of themes running concurrently through them. In the last few weeks we have been looking at **ch21** and that although it deals with actual events that occurred immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, it also reveals in microcosm how the church now relates to the risen Lord. The church is represented by a small group of disciples and the failures and successes they experience establish principles that still apply to church life even in this modern age. We have seen the futility of serving Christ in the flesh and the value and importance of serving him as He directs and empowers. We’ve seen an example of the Lord’s consistent, loving provision for His people and established the only acceptable motive for serving Him, which, of course, is love – love for the One who first loved us and gave Himself for us.

But, before we entered the flow of this stream of thought in **ch21**, we were marking the 7 “Last Words” of Jesus in the Book. These are not statements made from the cross, which is a popular concept among pastors today. These are, in fact, statements made by Jesus in that period of time after His resurrection and before His ascension back into heaven. We’ve already looked at 5 of these post- resurrection statements. The 1st was Peace be with you (**20:19,21**); 2nd was As the Father has sent Me, I also send you (**20:21**); 3rd was Receive the Holy Spirit” (**20:22**); 4th: Do not be unbelieving, but believing (**20:27**); 5th: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (**20:29**). The 6th statement is one we looked at last time: Feed My sheep (**21:17, 15**); and the last is found in our text today and again in **vs21** - Follow Me. These 7 statements (last words) have been dubbed as: a great bequest, a great commission, a great consolation, a great challenge, a great benediction, a great responsibility, and a great invitation.

As we focus now on these 2 “last words” of Jesus, we should notice something interesting about both of them. They are both repeated: the 6th 3 times and the 7th twice. The repetition clearly flows from the narrative but that doesn’t make it any less significant. Anytime God says something once, we should definitely listen. But, if God says anything more than once, it

should do more than interest us, it should command our undivided and obedient attention.

Feed – The focus of vs15-17 is on the restoration and recommissioning of Peter as a disciple of Jesus. 3 times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him; 3 times Peter affirms that he does and 3 times, Jesus commands him to feed or tend to His sheep. Peter is being given a great responsibility because sheep need feeding, they need leading; they need being tended to. Sheep aren't the smartest of the domesticated animals and that's being kind. The truth is: sheep are ignorant and defenseless and they need the protection and guidance of the shepherd.

This responsibility is also great for what it demands of the shepherd. Of course, Jesus is the Good Shepherd ([John 10:11](#)), the Great Shepherd ([Heb 13:20-21](#)) and the Chief Shepherd ([1 Peter 5:4](#)). Pastors and church leaders are merely the “under-shepherds” who are tasked with shepherding God's flock. There are plenty of enemies constantly working to destroy the flock and shepherds must be alert and courageous. Most importantly, they must be obedient to the Chief Shepherd as they minister to His flock. While it's true that the Holy Spirit equips certain people to serve as undershepherds, it's also true that each individual Christian must help to care for the flock. Each believer has a gift or gifts from the Lord that have been given to us to use to help protect and perfect the flock.

The main reason that Jesus' command is such a great responsibility has little to do with the character of the under-shepherds or the deep need of the sheep. It has to do with Who the sheep belong to. Jesus said, “Feed...Tend My sheep.” If the flock belonged to us then we could do whatever we wanted with it, at least we could do what we think is best. But, the flock is not our, it belongs to Jesus, and as such, we must do as He wishes, recognizing our great responsibility to Him. Acknowledging Jesus as the Chief Shepherd and rightful owner of the flock should make us more diligent in serving Him.

Now, we could spend our whole time here talking about the nature of sheep and the qualifications of shepherds but that is not the primary focus of the text. In [vs15-17](#), the burden of the text is more precise. Jesus is telling Peter that his primary responsibility as an under-shepherd is to feed the flock that's being entrusted to him. But, what does this means? If Peter's being

commissioned as an under-shepherd over God's flock, how does he go about feeding them? The answer becomes clear when we recognize the only source of true spiritual sustenance that exists for believers – God's Word. There's nothing else for Christians to feed upon! Thus, "feeding" means to teach, share or in some way communicate God's Word. Under-shepherds are to teach the Bible both by word and by example.

That may seem pretty basic – the pastor's job is to teach the Word – but looking at the current spiritual state of the church in general, it appears that this point is not as clear as it should be. The difficulty of this point isn't that pastors don't know what they should do; the problem is they often don't know how to perform their duty properly, effectively.

The principles that govern our responsibility in this area are similar to those that deal with personal study of the Bible.

1) The Bible should be taught regularly (consistently). Just as with personal bible study, a failure to plan is a plan for failure. Blocks of time should be set aside through out the week for fasting on the word and for feeding others. The obvious place for this is Sunday morning here at church but that's just 1 area. There's a weekly Bible Study, a monthly Ladies Bible Study, and regular Prayer meetings throughout the month where the Word is communicated and shared and discussed at length to promote a deeper understanding. All of these are available but even this list is not exhaustive. There are countless opportunities to engage with and share God's truth with other believers

2) The Bible should be taught systematically. Some ministers preach from the Bible and that is good. Some merely teach about the Bible or teach around it. But the best way to study the Bible is systematically – start at the beginning of a book and make your way through it, covering as much as you can along the way. A systematic approach allows for clearer teaching and greater access to the context of the passage, reducing the possibility of misinterpretation or a adherence to traditions rather than the clear truth of the Word.

3) The Bible should be taught comprehensively. We're not called to be specialists in the areas of prophecy or the doctrines of Paul or the science of Creation. There's nothing wrong with these topics as long as we don't focus on them exclusively to the degree that we neglect the big picture of

Scripture a picture the flock certainly needs to see. The Bible is balanced in its many themes. Christianity is meant to be balanced. If our study and teaching of the Word is not comprehensive then the church will be unbalanced and it will not be effective.

I can't tell you how many "Christmas" sermons I've heard in my career as a church-goer, or Easter sermons for that matter; many of them just rehashing the same old material. It's particularly disturbing, if you're an avid note-taker, to discover that the preacher delivered the same sermon several years prior, with the same points and scripture references. I've even listened to messages that sounded like they were written on the way to the church. There's nothing inherently wrong with seasonal sermons and it's certainly not the shepherd's job to impress the flock but to instruct them in the Word. The only way that's going to happen is if the shepherd is in the Word. To feed others we must first be fed.

4) The Bible should be taught prayerfully. This is probably the most important principle and the least applied. You can employ the most effective Bible study tools out there and still miss the point of the Bible if you regularly fail to ask God to speak to you through His Word. The scribes were the great scholars of their day but they became mechanical in their method of study and so missed the Bible's main teaching. They failed to recognize Jesus when He came! When we pray, we're more conscious of meeting with God as we study and teach; we're more attentive to what God is saying to us and we're more sensitive to the needs of those we are teaching. There's nothing more exciting than to know that God is speaking both to us and through us to His people.

5) The Bible should be taught obediently. When God speaks, He does so for a purpose. He expects us to obey Him. Do we? If we do, our lives and the lives of those for whom we are responsible will be changed. Our churches will be changed, and so will our society. The truths we learn from God's Word should be visible in our lives. God's Word applies to the under-shepherds as much if not more than it does to the flock!

Finally, if our primary responsibility is to feed and tend to God's sheep, in whatever capacity the Lord has equipped us and empowered us to do so, what is our motivation for doing this? The only valid motivation is love but it's also our greatest responsibility! What do I mean? The most important

thing a pastor can do is love Jesus Christ. Yes, they need to be alert and courageous; they need to teach the Word effectively but above all of that, they need to love Jesus with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. But this is not just true for Pastors. If you are a Christian spouse, the most important thing you can do for your counterpart is to love Jesus supremely. If you are a Christian parent, the most important thing you can do for your children is to love Jesus first. The most important thing a Christian employer or employee can do is to love Jesus above all else. If we love Jesus properly then we will love those He has entrusted to us and we will serve Him and them faithfully, no matter what the cost.

18-19 – Jesus had a few more things to tell Peter and He really wanted Peter to pay attention to what he had to say because He prefaced His remarks with a great assurance. What He's saying to Peter needs to be remembered by Peter. What is Jesus talking about here? Peter's death! This is a prophecy of Peter's death by martyrdom. It's almost as if Jesus is saying that Peter's previous boast "I will lay down my life for Your sake" (**13:37**), a boast he hadn't been able to keep, would eventually be granted to him.

This had to be a shock to Peter. Jesus had just been speaking about Peter's life and future ministry and now He wants to discuss his death – in front of the others no less! Talk about a "wet blanket!" Peter was no doubt rejoicing in his restoration to fellowship and to his apostleship. Why bring this up now? The reality is that anyone who truly yields themselves to the Lord must honestly confront this matter of death. When a person settles the matter of death in their heart, they are then ready to live and to serve! All throughout John's Gospel, Jesus knew that His "hour" would come and He was prepared to obey the Father's will. We, as His followers, must also be willing to yield ourselves, just as He did, and be living sacrifices that are ready to be offered if it is the will of God.

Jesus employs imagery as He delivers this prophecy of Peter's death. He speaks of Peter's past, reminding him of his younger days when he had less responsibility and could do more as he pleased. Jesus references 2 things: the fastening of the belt (dressing himself) and going where he wanted. In his youth, Peter did both these things. In fact, in this very chapter, when Peter recognized that it was Jesus who was standing on the shore directing their fishing activities, he put on his outer garment (implies cinching up of

the belt) and dove into the sea and swam to shore.

But, in his old age, Peter would do neither of these things. In the future, another would bind Peter and carry him to a place he doesn't want to go. The day would come when another would take charge of Peter – and lead him to a place where his hands would be stretched out, crucified on a cross. They will lead Peter to his death. He will be restrained, no longer the master of his own movements.

It's entirely possible that Peter didn't quite understand exactly what Jesus was saying here. We only know what is implied because John tells us what Jesus meant in vs19. But, if Peter did grasp the gist of this prophecy, it must have given him a great chill. He'd been opposed to Jesus dying on a cross; he probably wasn't keen on experiencing that for himself. Yet, this prophecy from Jesus also gave Peter some great assurance. In a crucial moment just a few weeks before, Peter denied Jesus 3 times to save himself from the cross. Jesus now assures him that when the time came, Peter would face the challenge of the cross once again and he would embrace it. Jesus is promising Peter that he would die in a state of utter faithfulness and obedience to his Lord and Savior. He wasn't going to fold up like a cheap suit ever again.

John goes on to tell us that Peter's death would not be a tragedy and it would not be in vain. His death actually brought glory to God, as did the deaths of all the martyred Apostles. We've already seen how Lazarus' death brought glory to God in ch11. It was through his death and subsequent raising from the dead that the power of God was revealed in Jesus and His claims to deity were rendered undeniable. Similarly, the death of Jesus brought glory to God in that it revealed (demonstrated) God's love for sinful humanity and fulfilled His purpose in bringing salvation and reconciliation to His lost Creation. The great concern of Paul's life, according to Phil 1:20-21, was that he would bring glory to God, whether by his life or by his death. This should be the desire of every child of God.

Granted, I'm not looking to go out on the next truckload but the point is: I am ready to go. I am willing to put the circumstance of both my life and my eventual death in the hands of the Lord for Him to do as He sees fit with either. How does one come to this point of acceptance? By engaging in that great invitation that Jesus extends to Peter at the end of vs19, "Follow Me."

Why is this the solution? If we are properly following Jesus, then our eyes will be on Him and not on ourselves, our desires or our circumstances.

Peter is commanded to follow Jesus and he does so immediately. But, as soon as Peter is following Jesus, he allows his gaze to drift off of Jesus on to someone else. This is a mistake that Peter has made before. After the incident of the first great catch of fish in Luke 5, Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and looked at himself and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, oh Lord!” (v8). Later, when Peter was walking on the stormy sea, he took his eyes off Jesus and placed them on his surrounding circumstances – the wind and waves – and immediately he began to sink. Clearly, it is dangerous to look at ourselves or our circumstances instead of looking at Jesus. A failure to properly maintain our gaze of Jesus is a failure to follow Him. That failure is nothing short of disobedience.

It would be disturbing if the Lord came to us and told us, straight up, that we would die and how we would die. It would be quite disconcerting, but only for a little while. Once you realize that His prophecy is a confirmation that you will not only persevere in your faith to the end but that your death will somehow bring glory to God and maybe even bring sinners to repentance and acceptance of Him, it should fill you with a profound sense of assurance.

Jesus told Peter that there was coming a day when he would no longer be in control of his own movements. The only way that Peter could be OK with that statement was if he knew that God was in complete control of all his movements. When you put your life completely into the Lord’s hands, there’s no need to worry what the outcome of your life may be. God has it all in hand – the time, the place, the method and the meaning. But, the one thing we should constantly be aware of is that God doesn’t call very many of His children to give their lives for the cause of Christ but He does call all of His children to live their lives for the cause of Christ – to follow close behind Him, to keep our eyes upon Him and to step out in faith whenever and wherever He calls us to do so.

Have you? Are you ready for what God has planned for you next? 😊