

# Follow Me

John 21:15-25

SS Lesson for 04/15/2018

**Devotional Scripture:** 1 John 4:7-21

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## Introduction

### Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson review how and why Jesus challenged Peter to **Follow Me**. The **study's aim** is to see that everything in God's Word is there for our learning. The **study's application** is to govern our life's choices by the clear instructions of Scripture.

*(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

### Key Verse: John 21:15

*So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."*

### Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

**21:15-17.** Earlier **Peter** had denied Jesus beside a fire (18:18, 25). Now beside another fire he was restored publicly. **Jesus** called him **Simon Son of John**, as He had when He first met Peter (1:42). Jesus asked him, **Do you truly love Me more than these?** What did Jesus mean by "these"? Jesus probably was referring to the disciples, in light of Peter's proud statement that he never would fall away no matter what others did (Matt. 26:33, 35; Luke 22:33; John 13:37). Jesus' threefold question and threefold commission of apostolic mission contrast directly with Peter's three denials. Three times Peter said he did not even know the Lord (18:17, 25, 27); now three times he said he loved the Lord (21:15-17). No matter how great a person is, he may fall (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12). But God's grace and forgiveness will restore the repentant. This provision of grace would be important, for the church would soon face great persecution and even church leaders would waver in their commitments. Three times **Jesus** commissioned **Peter** to care for the flock: **Feed My lambs;** (v. 15); **Take care of My sheep** (v. 16); **Feed My sheep** (v. 17). Some Roman Catholics assume that this asserts Peter's primacy, but this is foreign to the passage (cf. 1 Peter 5:2). In Jesus' three questions of **love** (*agapas*, *agapas*, and *phileis*) and His three commands of duty (*boske*, "tend"; *poimaine*, "herd, lead to pasture"; *boske*) various Greek synonyms are used. Since it is difficult to see any consistent distinctions that John intended, most scholars see these as stylistic variations.

**21:18-19.** **I tell you the truth** (cf. 1:51) introduces a solemn prediction of Peter's coming crucifixion. In old age **Peter** was tied to a cross and had his hands stretched out (cf. 1 Clement 5:4; 6:1; Eusebius *The Ecclesiastical History* 2. 25). Obedience to Jesus' command, **Follow Me**, is the key issue in every Christian's life. As Jesus followed the Father's will, so His disciples should follow their Lord whether the path leads to a cross or to some other difficult experience.

**21:20-23.** **Peter**, having been informed about God's plan for his life, naturally wondered what the future held for his friend John, **the disciple whom Jesus loved**. **Jesus** sharply rebuked Peter for being curious about God's will for another's life: **What is that to you? You must follow Me**. Some disciples can be

easily distracted by unnecessary questions about God's secret will; as a result they neglect God's plainly revealed will. God's plans for Christians vary and His reasons are not often made known. Peter was to commit himself to God's plain commands to him. John then corrected a faulty inference made by some believers that John **would not die**. Interestingly Jesus' last words recorded by John in this Gospel refer to His **return**. Of course, Jesus gave no indication *when* He would return. **The false rumor** about Jesus' words to Peter show the possibility of misunderstanding God's promises. Christians must seek to understand God's Word accurately.

**21:24-25.** The Fourth Gospel ends with information about its composition. The beloved **disciple** is identified as the author. The first sentence in verse 24 may have been someone other than John, but the wording sounds Johannine (cf. 19:35). **These things** most likely refer to the entire Gospel. The words, **We know that his testimony is true**, were probably written by someone other than John. They are an endorsement, perhaps by the Ephesian church, or a testimony from the early church as a whole. They were certainly in a position to know the facts better than any generation since then. The final verse—with its statement about the world **not having room for all the books that could be written** about Jesus' deeds—may seem at first glance to be an exorbitant overstatement. (The **I** seems to suggest John as the author of this verse though that is uncertain.) Yet the Gospels record only a small sample of Jesus' words and works. Someone has estimated that a person can read aloud Jesus' words recorded in the Gospels in only about three hours. But if all that the infinite Son of God said and did in His Incarnation were pondered, the resulting commentary would be endless.

### **Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary**

Last week's text looked at the encounter of seven disciples with the risen Lord Jesus by the Sea of Galilee when He had invited them to "come and dine" (John 21:12). This week's lesson picks up the scene a short while later, after they had finished eating: "When they had dined" (vs. 15). What followed the lakeside breakfast was perhaps one of the most momentous conversations that the Apostle Peter ever took part in. Ever since the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter had lived under a cloud of guilt from having denied his Lord. The fact that Jesus had foretold this denial would not have assuaged the bitterness. Peter lived with the shame of knowing that while the other disciples fled and abandoned their Master, he had explicitly and publicly disowned Him—not just once in a careless moment, but three times. Peter was one of the first persons Jesus appeared to after His resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). We can reasonably surmise that the Lord extended His forgiveness at this initial meeting. It would be unlike Jesus to withhold His grace or let one He loved dangle in uncertainty. But Jesus wanted more for Peter than simply the assurance of being forgiven. He wanted to restore him as a servant to fulfill the role of apostle that he had been called to (cf. Matt. 16:17-19). In accomplishing Peter's restoration, Jesus did not delve into a lengthy analysis of his sin. Instead, He asked this simple but penetrating question: "Lovest thou me more than these?" It was a fitting question, for it pointed to the crux of Peter's earlier failure—he had loved the approval of others more than the favor of Christ. Now he had to decide—did he really love Jesus more than the other disciples did? We must note that Jesus' question can also be read, Did Peter love Jesus more than he loved the other disciples—or other things? But it seems possible that the Lord was gently pointing Peter back to his boast that even if everyone else deserted Jesus, he would not (Mark 14:29). Peter did not attempt to answer the comparative element of the question in any case. He simply declared, "Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." He knew that Jesus could read his heart and that He would discern genuine love for Him there, even if it was not flawless and heroic as Peter once assumed. Jesus did not confirm or dispute Peter's statement but responded with a simple command: "Feed my lambs." This was the essential next step in Peter's restoration. He needed to get his mind off his past failure and look instead to the task ahead. Jesus indeed had a leadership role in mind for him, but that leadership was to be humble in nature. He was to take on the shepherd's role of feeding and caring for the Lord's sheep, His followers. In this he would be following the humble footsteps of the Shepherd Himself. In carrying out this command, Peter would also be demonstrating his love for the Master in a way that could not be disputed.

## **Lesson Introduction and Background**

### **From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

Simon Peter was a broken man following his denial of Jesus; he “wept bitterly” at having done so (Matthew 26:75). We can only imagine how often his thoughts tormented him in the aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion. But the resurrected Jesus offered Peter the opportunity to make a “comeback.” Accepting that opportunity meant leaving remorse and shame behind as he entered a place of renewed service to the Master. Jesus’ words of restoration and his challenge of service to Peter have something to teach us yet today.

Today’s lesson considers the final 11 verses of John’s Gospel. The immediate background is the 14 verses of John 21:1-14, which was last week’s lesson. A further item of background to consider in relation to this week’s text specifically is a caution in how we interpret the Gospel writer’s use of synonyms and near synonyms. Noticing that the writer used two Greek words that are translated “love,” two translated “sheep,” two for the care given to sheep, and two for “know,” readers over the years have tried to determine what point John was making by using different words. But there is scant evidence that John intended anything significant by this variety. For example, when considering the Gospel of John as a whole, we see the different Greek verbs translated “love” used interchangeably in John 3:35; 5:20; 11:5, 36. It is therefore more likely that John used different words stylistically, perhaps to avoid monotonous repetition. We do the same thing by using words like cat and feline interchangeably. We may also think of welcoming and hospitable; automobile and car; desire and want; etc.

The image of a shepherd caring for sheep is central to our text. This was an image very close to the experience of biblical people, drawing as it does on a common occupation. The Old Testament uses sheep and shepherd to picture the relationship between God and his people, most notably in Psalm 23. The relationship between God’s people and their leaders, especially the king, was portrayed in similar terms. Israel could be described as sheep with no shepherd (Numbers 27:15-17; 1 Kings 22:17), and wicked leaders of the people were characterized as bad shepherds (Jeremiah 23:1-4; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:1-10). The picture of sheep without a shepherd is also used of people in Jesus’ day (Matthew 9:36). Jesus described himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11), in contrast to those “thieves and robbers” who had no concern for the welfare of the sheep (10:8-10). Jesus went beyond what an ordinary shepherd would do, even giving his own life for the sake of his sheep (10:11, 17, 18). His exchange with Peter should be understood against this backdrop.

## **Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Following Jesus out of Love (John 21:15-17)**

15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."

16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep."

17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

### **Loving God’s nurturing so that we can nurture others (15)**

*Nurturing the weak (1 Kings 19:5-8)*

5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

*Nurturing the needy (2 Kings 4:2-6)*

2 Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil." 3 Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. 4 Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." 5 She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. 6 When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

*Nurturing through others (2 Cor 8:14)*

14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,

*Nurturing by God's supplying directly (2 Cor 9:10)*

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

*Nurturing through God's glorious riches (Phil 4:19)*

19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

**Loving God's leading so that we can lead others (16)**

*Leadership that leads to justification (Gal 3:24)*

24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

*Leadership that leads to the right way (Mark 10:32)*

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

*Leadership that leads to the Father God (John 14:6)*

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

*Leadership that leads to a cleared way (1 Thess 3:11)*

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

**Loving God's knowledge and wisdom so that we pass it on to others (17)**

*A knowledge of God that comes from Christians being a shining light (2 Cor 4:6)*

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

*Knowledge that comes from the anointing of the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20)*

20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

*A knowledge that gives us an understanding that God is the "true" God (1 John 5:20)*

20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true — even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

*Knowledge that is eternal life (John 17:3)*

3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

## ***Following Jesus by Responding to His Call (John 21:18-19)***

18 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish."  
19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."

### **Responding by seeking God's guidance (18)**

*Guidance that is part of God's plan for our life (Jer 29:11)*

11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

*Guidance into truth (John 16:13-15)*

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

*Guidance that is not under the law (Gal 5:18)*

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

*Guidance that represents we are a child of God (Rom 8:14)*

14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

### **Responding by glorifying God in all we do (19)**

*Glorifying God is part of praise and worship (Ps 34:3)*

3 Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.

*All Christians should glorify God by the good lives they live (1 Peter 2:12)*

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

*Sometimes sickness is used so that God might be glorified (John 11:4)*

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

*Glorifying God through our transformed lives (2 Cor 3:18)*

18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

## ***Following Jesus Personally (John 21:20-23)***

20 Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?"

21 Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?"

22 Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

23 Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?"

## **Personally be committed to God (20)**

*Committed to do the will of God (John 4:34)*

34 "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

*Committed to finish the assigned tasks (John 5:36-37)*

36 "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form,

*Committed to the end of life (John 19:30)*

30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

*Committed to not give up (Heb 12:1-5)*

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

## **Personally by not comparing ourselves to others (21-22)**

*Comparing to others does not save us, only our seeking Jesus saves (Luke 13:23-24)*

23 Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, 24 "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

*Comparing to others may disappoint us because God's values are different (Luke 13:30)*

30 Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

*Comparing to others sometimes leads to pride (Luke 18:9-11)*

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector.

*Comparing our sin to others is meaningless, we all must repent or we will perish (Luke 13:1-5)*

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

## **Personally by being prepared give up life (23)**

*Willing to die because of keeping the faith (2 Tim 4:6-7)*

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

*Willing to die because of the name of Jesus (Acts 21:13)*

13 Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

*Willing to die because to die is gain in Jesus (Phil 1:21)*

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

*Willing to die trying to finish the task Jesus has assigned (Acts 20:24)*

24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

### **Following Jesus Because of His Truth (John 21:24-25)**

24 This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.

25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

### **Truth through God's Word (24)**

*God's word is truth because God is righteous (Ps 119:142)*

142 Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true.

*God's word is truth because Jesus is the word (John 1:14)*

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

*God's word is truth because Jesus' words brings knowledge of the truth (John 8:31-32)*

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

*God's word is truth because it is the actual Word of God (1 Thess 2:13)*

13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

### **Truth through Jesus' works (25)**

*Jesus' works provides knowledge that He is God in the flesh (John 10:38)*

38 But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

*Jesus' works testified that He was sent from God (John 5:36)*

36 "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.

*Jesus' works were accredited by God (Acts 2:22)*

22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

# Conclusion and Other Thoughts

## ***Concluding Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh***

### **Jesus and Peter: Love's Obligation (21:15-23)**

It is not enough merely to evangelize men. Discipleship begins with salvation, but it blossoms into a continuing process of growth and service. Our Lord informed His disciples through Peter that we must not only seek men's souls, but we must shepherd them also. And so we move from the well-known occupation of the fisherman, to that of the shepherd.

Most commentators seem to view verses 15-23 as a kind of public restoration of Peter to leadership by our Lord. That, to me, does not seem to be the case. I am not certain that Peter ever really ceased to be a leader among men. It was he who suggested this fishing expedition and the others gladly followed. Neither do I believe that Jesus' three-fold question was put to Peter before the eyes and ears of the other six. Notice verse 20: "Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper ..." You see, all must agree that at some point in this conversation Jesus and Peter left the others. I would suggest that it was at the outset. There is nothing in verse 15 which implies the place of the conversation, only the time. The reason that John alone records this event may be that he followed behind closely enough to overhear the conversation.

The correspondence between the three-fold question of the Lord and the three-fold denial of Peter is difficult not to see. Jesus began by asking Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" (verse 15).

Peter had boasted of his love for the Lord before his denial, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (Matthew 26:33). Peter had then claimed that his love for the Lord surpassed that of any other. It is at this point that Jesus pressed Peter for a response.

Peter affirmed his love for the Lord Jesus, but with two notable exceptions. First, he did not make any comparisons between his love and that of the others. Second, he did not dare to speak of his love with as lofty a term as that employed by the Savior. He does love the Lord. As God knows his heart, there is great affection there. But his brash self-confidence has been eroded away by his denials.

Accepting this answer on face value, the Lord commissions Peter with the second duty of a disciple—that of tending the flock: "Tend My lambs" (verse 15).

Now, a second time, Jesus poses the question to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" (verse 16).

The comparison of Peter's love to that of the others is no longer involved. Only the intensity of Peter's love is queried. Peter's answer was the same: "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You" (verse 16).

With only slight variation, Jesus responded, "Shepherd My sheep" (verse 16).

It was the third question which grieved Peter deeply: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" (verse 17).

There are two things about this question which would have grieved Peter. First of all, it was asked for the third time. The correspondence between these three questions and his three-fold denial is unmistakable. The question is asked specifically in the light of Peter's denial of his Lord. The second cause of grief would be in the change of words employed. Jesus had previously used the word *agape* (or more precisely, the verb *agapao*) in the first two questions. Peter had answered using the less intense term *phileo*. In the third question, Jesus dropped the stronger term He had previously employed and adopted the weaker term with which Peter had twice responded. The outcome of this would seem to be that Jesus had progressively lowered the quality of love concerning which he is questioning Peter. The force of this might be paraphrased in this way:

Question 1: Peter, do you deeply love Me, even above all the others?

Question 2: Peter, do you deeply love Me?

Question 3: Peter, do you at least have a genuine affection for Me?

The scholars have greatly differed over the implications of the change of the Greek terms for love. But let me say this to those of you who are students of the Greek language and still remain single. If you were to become very interested in a particular young woman, you would have intense interest and concern over what Greek term she would use to describe her affection for you. A 'phileo' love for you would not be nearly as meaningful in your mind, as an 'agape' love would be.

Peter again must appeal to our Lord's omniscience. "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love (phileo) You" (verse 17).

With this, Peter's commission is once more repeated: "Tend My sheep" (verse 17).

One might be inclined to consider our Lord's questioning a bit severe in the light of Peter's previous repentance and restoration. I believe that there are several purposes served in this interchange. First Peter is reminded of the folly of self-confidence. Second, our Lord's purpose was not to work up feelings of guilt, but of humility. No one can shepherd the flock rightly without humility. Third, Peter is reminded that the measure of one's love for Christ is not measured by the confessions of their lips, but by the conduct of their lives. Peter's love will be evidenced by His care of God's sheep. Finally, this three-fold question is also a three-fold commission, assuring Peter that in spite of His fall, God has a significant work for him to do.

Finally, the three-fold commission gives the task of Peter a distinct note of solemnity. This work of shepherding the flock is one that will be done at great personal sacrifice. This is made clear in the following verses: "Truly, truly, ... Follow Me!" (John 21:18-19).

In Peter's younger days he did as he pleased. In his later years, he would become subject to the will of others. In particular, John spelled out that these words of Jesus were a prediction that Peter would die the martyr's death (verse 19). Following Jesus would mean, for Peter, walking in His steps, even to death. No wonder our Lord's commission was given in such a serious manner.

Peter could not help but see John, who was following them at a distance (verse 20). Peter wondered if his fate was that common to the other disciples. What about John? Would he also be called upon to die the martyr's death (verse 21)? Our Lord informed Peter that this was not for Peter to concern himself with. His sole obligation was to follow His Lord in the path which was ordained for him.

Some who heard the report of the Lord's response to Peter were inclined to take His words to mean that John would not die (verse 23). But our Lord had only said that whether John lived or died, it was not Peter's concern. (I suspect that the real point of interest was whether or not our Lord was committing Himself to return before John died.)

## **Conclusion**

This portion of Scripture makes a unique contribution to the gospels by underscoring the duty of the disciples from the other side of the cross. What should Peter do? What should any disciple do? Jesus' answer was two-fold. First, we must follow Jesus in seeking the salvation of men (evangelism). Second, we must shepherd the souls of those who are saved (pastoring, shepherding).

I believe these two imperatives are not directed only at Peter or the seven disciples present, but are the general commands of our Lord as stated in the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Further, it would seem that while our Lord commands every disciple to follow Him in seeking and shepherding the souls of men, He wants us to know that our individual paths may differ. It is not the disciple's concern to trouble himself about the individual calling of other disciples. That is a matter between a disciple and his Lord.

John, and his brother James, beautifully exemplify the sovereignty of God in His individual purpose for His disciples. Of the apostles, James died first (Acts 12:2), and John last. James left no written record for ages to come. John wrote five books. As brothers, both of these men had identical backgrounds and influences. Both were included, with Peter, in the inner circle of our Lord. We cannot hope to scrutinize the reasons for James' 'untimely' death, but we must reckon it to be in the Master's plan.

I am interested by the struggle evidenced in the commentaries over the fact that John seems to have two conclusions. Some have questioned the authenticity and value of the last chapter. To my mind, the answer is all too obvious. John closed his book the same way many preachers (hopefully, I am included here) conclude their sermons—one aimed at the unbeliever, the other at the Christian. John 20:30-31 is the conclusion of the apostle for the one who has not yet reached a decision of faith in Christ as his Savior. To this person, he writes,

"Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

But John's gospel has clear implications for the disciple of our Lord as well. Chapter 21 confronts the disciple of our Lord with the duties of discipleship: seeking and shepherding. For these readers, John concludes with an

emphasis on the reliability of these accounts, and of the vast number of incidents which could have been included in such an account.

In addition, John, in these last verses, clearly identifies himself as the author for his readers benefit.

“This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written” (John 21:24-25).

In Peter’s commission by our Lord we are reminded again of God’s ability to use even our sins to bring about our good and His glory (Romans 8:28). Past sins, once forgiven, should not hinder us from future service. While Peter should have been strengthened and humbled by his three-fold denial of the Lord, he should also be encouraged by his three-fold commission.

This chapter says much to every Christian about the matter of servanthood.

(1) True discipleship is evidenced by servanthood—that is, expressing, indeed continuing, the servanthood of our Lord, even in His absence. Follow me!

(2) Servanthood is rooted in and motivated by our love for Jesus Christ.

(3) Servanthood involves evangelism and shepherding. It seeks both to save the lost and to strengthen the believers.

(4) Servanthood involves self-sacrifice, even unto death.

(5) Servanthood concentrates on God’s will for us, and does not compare our calling with that of others.

Finally, I am encouraged to learn that my fellowship with the Lord Jesus is not one whit inferior to that of the apostles. They could not turn back the clock to the days before the cross. They would not have wished to lengthen the period of His post-resurrection appearances. Intimate fellowship with Christ was only possible after His ascension, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. How is this fellowship experienced? Let me suggest three avenues:

**(1) In the Scriptures.** We come to know our Lord as He was predicted in the Old Testament, and through the eyes of four men who knew Him well in the gospels.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:1-4).

**(2) In suffering.** It was the apostle Paul who wrote, “... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10, cf. also Colossians 1:24).

**(3) In service.** Not only is there a fellowship in suffering, but in service. We sense the closeness of our Lord when His power is released in our lives in His service (cf. Philippians 3:10).

Just as the disciples of our Lord sensed a deeper and fuller fellowship with the Lord Jesus after His ascension, so can you and I. Praise God!

*(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/40-duties-discipleship-john-211-25>)*

## **Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

Jesus' words to Peter are both reassuring and unsettling. They reassure us that anyone, even one who denies knowing Jesus, can be restored to fellowship with the Lord by his gracious forgiveness. But they are unsettling because they remind us of the opposition to the gospel. John experienced that opposition personally through his exile on the island of Patmos. There he wrote the book of Revelation, describing himself as "your brother and companion in the suffering" (Revelation 1:9). Our response to Jesus' words to Peter needs to be what Peter's was: to rise to the challenge to follow Jesus and feed his sheep. Martyrdom may not be in our future. But giving our lives sacrificially in service to Jesus must still be the theme of our lives

## ***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary***

1. The most powerful expression of our love for Jesus is keeping His commandments (John 21:15)
2. Sometimes it is necessary to reaffirm our commitment to Christ (vss, 16-17)
3. We have to follow Jesus even when it leads where we do not want to go (vss. 18-19)
4. We should not be distracted by God's plans for other believers (vss. 20-23)
5. We should be eager to testify to the goodness of Jesus (vs. 24)
6. The wondrous works of Jesus are unlimited (vs. 25)