

## “On Loving and Following Christ”

John 21:18-25 (NRSV)

**An extraordinary anecdote** comes to us from the annals of ancient Persian history. As the story goes, **Cyrus**, the great conqueror of the then known world, including Babylon, had a general under his authority whose wife was suspected of treason. She was tried before a great and austere tribunal, found guilty and sentenced to death. After the sentence was pronounced, the woman’s husband, made his way to Cyrus’ throne and requested, “O King Cyrus, **please let me take her place.**” Cyrus, in awe at what he heard, said to his court, “**Can we terminate a love as great as this?**” He then paroled the woman to her husband. As the couple left the court, the general said to his wife, “Did you see the benevolent look in Cyrus’ eyes as he pardoned you?” The wife responded, “**I only had eyes for the one who loves me enough that he was willing to die for me.**”

This is the love that the Bible says husbands should have for their wives: “**Husbands, love your wives**, just as Christ loved the church and **gave himself up for her ...**” (Eph. 5:25). And this is also the love that friends should have for each other: “**No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends**” (Jn. 15:13).

This remarkable Persian story dimly reflects **the burning emotion of Peter’s heart** as he sat across the breakfast fire from Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias and was drawn by his Lord’s repeated questions and affirmations to consciously rekindle and affirm his own love for him. All Peter could see was the One who loved him enough that he was willing to die for him. Of course, **Peter loved Jesus Christ with all his heart**, and by verbalizing it again he received not only restoration, but also stated for all believers the highest priority in life – experiencing and loving God. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and might. Our lives, our service, our good deeds mean nothing without a true love for God.

As we continue the story of Peter’s restoration, we see that priority extended and clarified. While it’s true that serving alone doesn’t prove we love God, it’s equally true that we cannot honestly love God without serving him. Peter not only received **a threefold restoration** but also **a threefold commission**: “Feed my lambs (21:15).” “Tend my sheep (21:16).” “Feed my sheep (21:17).” The implication is this, “Put your love into practice.”

This is even more significant when we realize it was an ancient Near-Eastern custom to **say something three times** before witnesses in order to solemnize it (Raymond E. Brown, John, p. 1112). With his restoration complete a life of service awaited the apostle Peter.

In John's Gospel 21:18-23 we see **what Jesus Christ did to infuse Peter with the proper perspective for serving him**. This text provides us with universal, unchanging principles for all who would respond to God's call.

### 1. **A life of service is an increasingly difficult life** (John 21:18-19).

Jesus focused the conversation on this matter of service by telling Peter about **future difficulties** that awaited him (21:18-19). Sometimes we think things will get better and better; in fact, life usually sets harder and harder challenges before us. That's why we might as well get ready.

There've been essentially two interpretations of these words.

Some feel Jesus was simply telling Peter that whereas he was **once an independent, competent young man** who could take care of himself, **someday he'd be an old man** who would stretch out his hands to others in order to be dressed and that he will become so dependent that he'd be taken to places he'd rather not go. Nevertheless, he will glorify God by his godly demeanour as he dies of old age. This is what many who are fortunate enough to live to an advanced old age discover. This is what those who care for older parents have discovered. This is, in fact, how **Pope John Paul II**, suffering from various ailments including Parkinson's, saw his last years.

The second interpretation is that despite his aged infirmity **Peter would die a martyr's death by crucifixion**, which in fact, happened. The giveaway to this interpretation is John's description of Peter's death as a means "by which he would glorify God," which according to Raymond Brown, was standard language for Christian martyrdom (John, 1966, 1970, Vol. 2, p. 1121). Various early church commentators, including Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Cyprian, also view the phrase, "you will stretch out your hands" as a description of crucifixion (J.M. Bernard, St. John, Vol. 2, 1963, p. 709).

In any case, Jesus Christ was telling Peter very explicitly that **his subsequent life of service would be extremely difficult**, with the further humiliation of his activist ego, including suffering increasing infirmity, and

culminating in the ignominy of his own personal crucifixion. (Tradition tells us that, in further deliberate humility and in contrast to his Lord's crucifixion, Peter asked to be crucified upside down.) What a way to encourage one's followers! But believe it: **each devoted servant of Jesus Christ will have to bear his/her own cross** (Mk. 8:34-36).

This was dramatically seen in **the early years of the Salvation Army**. When **William Booth** began his incredible mission work in East London, England in 1865, it drew violent opposition, which grew even more violent in subsequent years.

One Salvation Army officer came into a meeting loaded down with dead cats and rats; he explained these had been thrown at him; and that he caught and held the dead animals because if he dropped them the crowd would merely pick them up to be thrown again. .... Beatings were not uncommon ... some were killed and many were maimed. Even children were not immune; hoodlums threw lime in the eyes of a child of a Salvation Army member. [This rather sounds to me like what the Taliban do in Afghanistan to stop the education of women rather than what civilized English people would do!] The newspapers ridiculed Booth. Punch referred to him as "Field Marshall von Booth." Soon a band of thugs and ruffians organized themselves to disrupt ... the meetings of the Salvation Army. They often attacked Salvation Army members as they paraded through the streets or held open-air meetings. They frequently stormed Salvation Army meeting halls by the hundreds, broke out the window panes, and wrecked the inside of buildings. At first the police did little to stop [what was commonly called] the "Skeleton Army." Instead of helping they frequently harassed Booth and his followers (Clyde E. Fant, Jr, et al, 20 Centuries of Great Preaching, Vol. 5, 1971, p. 204).

Why were the Salvationists of 100 years ago the offscouring of the earth? Why did Peter come to such an end? Why did the apostle Paul suffer similar abuse? Why, in spite of all this hassle, do Christians go on and on?

For [he said] **the love of God urges us on**, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore we have all died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

**The love of Christ compels us and controls us.** The love of Christ keeps us going in spite of what we may encounter. Christ's love so grips us that if we walk with him, we will live, and even die, with him! As the hymn goes, "Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all" (I. Watts). The love of Christ so grips his followers that they no longer want to live for themselves only, but for him and for others, and that will mean obedience and mission – going where he sends us, going where he goes before us – even if it means hardship and suffering.

**If our lives are characterized by ease,** if we have no problems because of our Christian faith, something is likely wrong. **John Stott**, preaching on the passage I have just quoted at All Soul's Church in London, once said:

Now the church is not persecuted as much as ignored. Its revolutionary message has been reduced to a toothless creed for bourgeois suburbanites. Nobody opposes it any longer, because really there is nothing to oppose. My own conviction, for what it is worth, is that if Christians were to compromise less, we would undoubtedly suffer more. If we were to hold fast to the ... Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, and of salvation as an absolutely free and undeserved gift, then the cross again would become a stumbling block to the proud. If we were to maintain the high moral standards of Jesus – of incorruptible honesty and integrity, of chastity before marriage and fidelity in it, and of costly, self-sacrificial love, then there would be a public outcry that the church had returned to Puritanism. If we were to dare once more to talk plainly about the alternatives of life and death, salvation and judgment, heaven and hell, then the world would rise up in anger against such "old-fashioned rubbish." Physical violence, imprisonment and death may not be the fate of Christians in the West today, but faithfulness to Jesus Christ will without doubt bring ridicule and ostracism. This should not surprise us, however, for we are followers of the suffering Christ (Focus on Christ, p. 135).

Jesus Christ wanted Peter to know that if he would truly serve him, it was going to be difficult. And that is what he wants us to know too.

## **2. A life of service is a unique life (John 21:20-22).**

Apparently, as Jesus and Peter conversed, they left the fire and began walking together, with John not far behind as usual, and then Jesus

said another startling thing. **Peter noticed John nearby**, perhaps uncomfortable about his own future, and asked, “Lord, what about him?” (21:21). Good old Peter! Certainly, he loved Jesus with all his heart, but he was always poking his nose in other people’s business! He figured he might as well ask about John’s future. Jesus answered, “If it is my will that he remain until I come [again], what is that to you?” (21:23b). That is to say, “What business is that of yours? Don’t always worry about other people’s business! Follow me!” “Don’t choose to concern yourself with what I choose to do with the lives of my other servants. You just need to keep following me. That should be enough for you!”

The Lord wasn’t discouraging Peter’s interest in the welfare of others, but rather **the unhealthy habit of measuring one’s lot with that of others**. A passage in **C. S. Lewis’s The Horse and His Boy** beautifully illustrates this point. The boy, Shasta, is conversing with the Christ figure, the lion Aslan, and Aslan recounts his sovereign working in Shasta’s life – how he was the lion who drove the jackels away while Shasta slept and the one who comforted him among the houses of the dead, and the one who propelled the boat that bore him to the shore to receive help. As Shasta listened, reflecting on the lion’s sovereign claims, he suddenly questioned:

Then it was you who wounded Aravis?

“It was I.”

“But what for?”

“Child,” said the Voice, “I am telling your story, not hers. **I tell no one any story but his [her] own.**” (1954, p. 147).

Each of our lives is a sovereign creation of God. Our worth and our effectiveness, God’s favour in our lives, are not to be determined by comparisons with others. We are not to be involved in unprofitable musings about the relative providence found in each of our lives – how one brother or sister has it easier than another, or how one ministry is fraught with hardship and another is not, or why one believer becomes famous and another remains obscure. We are each to simply follow Jesus Christ where he leads.

Everybody’s life is unique. Your road and calling will be different than mine.

### 3. **A life of service is a following life** (John 21:19, 22).

No matter what our situation in life, Jesus Christ's call to us is, **"Follow me."** Below the surface of these words there was something very beautiful and meaningful for Peter. This stemmed from the fact that the very first recorded command Jesus gave to Peter and Andrew, his brother, was **"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,"** as Jesus observed them fishing (Mk. 1:17; Matt. 4:19). Peter was younger then. He knew little of what would be involved, but he did follow. Now the command came again, with added, poignant urgency, **"Follow me!"** (21:22b). How these words had been deepened by the years of experience of living with and being mentored by Jesus! Peter had also been in Gethsemane with Jesus. He had witnessed the sufferings of Christ at Golgotha. He had denied his Lord. He'd relearned the necessity of affirming his love for Jesus Christ and of following him wherever he would lead.

That command rings out to all of us: "Follow me!" If you're a new Christian, this is Christ's abiding command, and you're asked to respond at your own level of understanding. But don't sit still. Our Lord is on the move and he wants you to get up and go with him. And, if you have been through the wars, it is still the same – perhaps seemingly more complex, yet still just as simple, **"Follow me!"**

Last weekend I was at an **"Emmaus" conference** with 140 other Presbyterians just north of Toronto, in Nottawasaga, Ontario, listening to three international speakers tell us the same thing. The only way the church will grow spiritually and numerically is to be on the road with the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, **away from Jerusalem**, away from the safe center of the church, away from simply "hunkering down" for the foreseeable future, **on the way to Emmaus**, to a Roman garrison town, to the so-called "Gentiles," to the places and to the people Jesus Christ came into the world to meet and save and heal. That's where I want to be; I hope you do too.

The late **b**, one of Canada's finest and most decorated poets, and a Presbyterian Christian to boot, has an accurate, moving poem about our Lord's leadership of us on this journey. It is entitled, "He Couldn't Be Safe (Isaiah 53)."

He chose a street  
where he wouldn't be safe  
and nobody there would save him.

He went to the parties  
that were not safe  
not saying who, but they knew him.

He went down the road  
to the place of the Skull.  
The soldier was there, and the criminal,  
and the ones who thought if he didn't have pull  
they wouldn't be safe to know him.

He couldn't be safe  
and come where we  
go, and hide,  
and storm, and agree  
on everything else if only he  
wouldn't show up our artful way  
with the light of his simplicity.

No, he couldn't be safe and be  
our Saviour.

Amen

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