

Follow Me!

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[0 : 00] Good evening everyone. I trust everyone's picked up a sermon outline on their way in, which you could follow tonight.

Do keep your Bibles open to John chapter 21, looking at verses 18 to 25. Well, let me pray before we start.

Dear God, we ask tonight that your word will speak to us afresh. For those of us who have been Christians for perhaps a long time, for those of us who are newly Christians, and even for those of us who may still be searching after you, we ask that, Lord, you might speak clearly, and that then, having heard your word, knowing that it comes from you, that we might have the courage to do as you tell us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, ever since the invention of Twitter, the whole idea of following someone has taken off and become rather fashionable again.

It used to be that you would follow things like a sport, or politics, or maybe the horses or something like that, but now you can actually say that you follow someone.

[1 : 31] So here's a quick pop quiz. Who do you think is the number one person in terms of following on Twitter? Any ideas? Barack Obama.

Not quite. His seventh, I think. Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga. 23.4 million people. And some of you might go, Lady Who? Followed closely, maybe not that close, by Justin Bieber.

20.8 million. Barack Obama is sort of, I think, seven or eight at 14.6 million. Now, some of you probably know this one. Who's the number one in Australia?

Kevin Rudd. Take it from a major in politics. But he's only at one million plus, so, you know, long way behind. But, well, long before Twitter, and I think Jesus was way ahead of his time, Jesus was telling people to follow him.

So if you read the Gospel of John, at the very start, you would have seen that in Chapter 1, he would have asked Philip to follow him. He also asked a couple of John's followers, who turned out to be Andrew and possibly John, to follow him.

[2 : 45] And now, right at the end of this Gospel, Jesus again repeats this command, this time to Peter. He says to Peter, not just once, but twice, in verse 19 and 22, follow me.

In between, we've had people come and go. We've had people who followed him, and then unfollowed him. Well, of course, following Jesus is very different to following someone on Twitter. You don't just get to click on an icon, passively sit back, and, you know, from time to time, get the occasional tweet, and, you know, perhaps have a chuckle, be mildly outraged, and then get back to your life.

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? What do you mean when you tell someone that you follow Jesus? Are you saying that you follow Jesus like you follow, you know, the footy, Geelong, or whatever?

Or, are you following him like you follow a motivational guru? You know, a Dr. Phil, or an Oprah? Or do you follow Jesus because you find his teachings attractive or intellectually stimulating?

[4 : 05] And more to the point, what did Jesus mean when he said, follow me? Now, if you look at the passage tonight, I find that that's actually a slightly strange sequence of events.

You think back to last week, we found that Jesus appeared to the disciples for the third time, and then he came to Peter. And he restored Peter. And then he gave Peter the commission to go feed my sheep or to build his church.

And that was Jesus' sort of main purpose and goal in history. And he had handed this awesome responsibly to Peter. So it seems a bit strange that it is only after he had done that, that he's only now checking to see that Peter was going to follow him.

After all, isn't this the same Peter that had said earlier in the Gospel that, you know, when Jesus asked whether they were going to desert him, that he said, to whom can we go?

For you, Jesus, have the words of eternal life. Wasn't this the same Peter that said, even if you desert me, even if all desert you, I, Peter, will not.

[5 : 17] granted, afterwards, he denied Jesus three times. But then, in the chapter just before, three times Jesus asked, do you love me?

And three times Peter said yes. So why only now does Jesus ask Peter to follow him? Now, some commentators or scholars think that this is just a reference to physical following.

He just had a conversation with Peter and Jesus was turning to walk away and said, come, follow me. But I think that's probably not right because if you look at the second instance of following me, it's clearly not a reference to physical following.

So Peter doesn't sound like someone Jesus had to persuade to follow him. So I believe that follow me, the instruction, is much more than simply an instruction to believe in Jesus.

It's simply, it's more than an instruction to commit to Jesus' commission or Jesus' mission to build his church and it's more than just a command to Peter to be loyal to Jesus or to swear allegiance to him.

[6 : 28] Yes, it's all these things but I believe it's actually more. So what more does it mean? Well, I think the clue is found in verse 18 and we read, very truly I tell you, when you were younger you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.

And verse 19 goes on to indicate that this is how Peter was going to die and tradition has it that Peter did die like Jesus crucified upside down on the cross by Nero.

But I think verse 18 is not simply a reference to Peter's death but it's also a reference to his life as well. Jesus is describing the manner in which Peter was to be his disciple.

The manner in which he was to follow him in both life and death. Peter was going to be like Jesus was going to follow Jesus in how he lived and how he died.

So verse 18 is really a description of Peter's life as one of self-denial of laying down his life for others of laying down his life where other people would be in control where he would forego his own interests out of love for others.

[7 : 56] It was going to be a life where in one sense things were going to get harder rather than easier because it says that when you were young you could go where you wanted to go but when you are now old you will be led where you do not wish to go.

So if last week feed my sheep was Jesus' way of saying what Peter was going to do then this week being led where he did not wish to go was a description of how it would happen.

and this was how Jesus himself lived because if you recall Jesus himself said that he did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

He was the one that said foxes have holes birds have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head and he was the one that said greater love has no one than this that someone should lay down his life for his friends.

So I think that when Jesus said follow me he was saying follow my way of life. Following Jesus for Peter was going to be costly.

[9 : 09] And so I think that's why Peter freaked out because in his mind he was saying yes I would follow Jesus there's no question about that but I would follow Jesus my way.

I would retain control of how I would follow Jesus. But to follow Jesus by following how he lived by following Jesus and being allowed to be led where I did not wish to go to be like Jesus it's no wonder that he sort of turned around and you know said who else is going to be like this what about John does John also have to follow you like I have to follow you.

To which Jesus' answer to Peter was yes John will also follow me but you don't worry about him because the cost of discipleship will work out differently for him as it is for you.

It will work out differently for everyone. You worry about yourself Peter what happens to John is between him and me. And so the second time he says actually more effectively you follow me.

and so the question now becomes what about us? And it's very clear if you read the rest of the gospels that what applies to Peter also applies to us.

[10 : 31] I found about five verses throughout the gospels but here are a couple. So Mark chapter 8 verse 34 if anyone wants to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

And then again in Luke 14 27 whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciples. So let's not I guess beat about the bush.

Following Jesus discipleship is costly. There's no two ways about it. And I think it's very important that as Christians we come to terms with this because at some stage in our life that question will be asked of us.

Will we follow him without any ifs or buts? Or will we say to Jesus yes I'll follow you provided that dot dot dot I'll follow you if it doesn't mean this I'll follow you but here are the exceptions and I guess it's not just hardships or you know poverty that we're talking about either because we asked to take up our cross just like Jesus did to suffer hatred potentially misunderstanding betrayal to be rejected because we follow Jesus to put ourselves wholly under the authority of Jesus to be led where we do not wish to go and yet at the same time just as Jesus did to do it without bitterness willingly with a willingness to forgive others who hurt us turning the other cheek these are very big demands isn't it to put aside our own interests our own ambitions to place our relationships in life under our relationship with Jesus to endure physical and emotional hardship to serve him and to entrust our destiny to him when we may not know where that would lead us and so

I guess with all these costs which I've racked up on the left hand side Matt who in their right mind would actually follow Jesus who would actually sign up probably no rational person looking at that would do that perhaps if Jesus said this is the cost but no more or he said this is how long it will cost you but after that things will get easier but what Jesus is asking for is an unconditional commitment I will follow you even if it leads me to where I do not wish to go who would do that well amazingly each of the disciples did Peter did John did and I guess many millions of people after them have done so and so you have to ask why why would they do it well I think they would only do it because they didn't just look at the cost but they also saw the great benefit and value that came from following Jesus in the corporate world where I used to come from this is what we called a thorough cost benefit analysis and so if you're a sensible and rational person and you do that kind of analysis then you will follow

[14 : 09] Jesus you will follow Jesus in spite of the seemingly high cost because you look at the other side you look at the great benefit that comes from following him well the passage tonight doesn't really spell out all the benefits and that's because John has already spent the entire gospel doing that over and over again he lays out Jesus own words and promises and so let me give you a few examples in John chapter 3 verse 16 he says to Nicodemus whoever believes in me will have eternal life in John 4 14 he says to the woman at the well drink the water I give and you will never thirst again and this is all metaphoric language but it sort of gives you a sense for the dimensions of the benefits that Jesus is offering I am the light of the world whoever follows me will never walk in darkness I am the bread of life whoever eats of me will live forever

I am the gate whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me even though they die will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die in my father's house are many rooms I go and prepare a place for you and I will come again to take you to myself so that where I am there you may be also I am the true vine those who abide in me and my words in them will bear much fruit and there's much more that I could go on in the gospel and in the bible generally but the drift of what Jesus and God is offering is this eternal life purpose satisfaction becoming like Jesus fruitfulness God's presence security meaning joy love everything that life is meant to be so I could go on and on but

I won't but I would want to pause because there is one benefit in this passage which John talks about and it's in verse 19 John indicated the manner in which Peter was going to die and then he says in verse 19 he said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God now it sounds a bit unexciting just saying glorifying God but if we stop to think that's really such a privilege that we are able to glorify God it's the very thing that Jesus himself says as the eternal son that he would be able to glorify the father in his death and I guess we may not all be called to die like Peter or even to suffer as much as Peter but we too can glorify God when we follow Jesus and I remember when we were young we felt so privileged that we could make our parents proud you know when we got the award for whatever being the most tidy desk for the week or something and then later on we would represent our school or country or company and those are things that we do

to in one sense glorify those people or institutions but those are mere human institutions earthly parents and what we're being offered here is the chance to glorify God the creator of heaven and earth not because he needs to be glorified but because he wants us to enjoy that privilege so think about it what a benefit as I was reading this passage I was quite fascinated at how John ends his gospel it's actually quite a different ending compared to all the other gospels in both content and style you know John has written about the big sweep of events about Jesus resurrection and now he sort of narrows it down and focuses on this couple of intimate encounters between Jesus and Peter and himself you know Peter and John two good friends who had reclined at Jesus bosom on the night before his death up to now he's sort of been a bit sort of sort of distant from the narrative you know he's used a third party voice he never called himself John he's always said the disciple whom Jesus loved he doesn't want to sort of impose himself on the story but now at the end he sort of finally gives himself away and gives us I think a glimpse into what is going on in his heart now you've got to remember that John wasn't writing there and then this is now probably some two or three decades maybe even more after Jesus resurrection Peter has actually gone and glorified God in his death and so John is now recalling these events writing everything down in the light of what's happened and in particular he's probably recalling the specific things that has happened in his life now we're not sure where John was he could have still been in Ephesus or perhaps maybe already in exile on Patmos but he's asking himself I think as he writes these last words was it worth it for

[19 : 43] Peter was it worth it for me he's in a sense weighing up the cost for himself you know he's probably not sure how would end and that's why he probably writes in verse 23 telling people don't assume that Jesus when he said that he needs to remain that means he's not going to die he doesn't know but then in verse 24 and 25 finally he gives I guess his own verdict on the events so in verse 24 he says this is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them but then in verse 25 which I find really touching he finally uses the first person singular he says but there are also many things that Jesus did if every one of them were written down I suppose that the world itself would not contain the books that would be written in it so he's probably trolling through all his memories and not quite believing the life that he's lived the amazing experiences besides the living God besides Jesus and he said if only I could tell this to everyone to everything that has happened but he knows it's impossible there's so much more he could say but he's probably thinking that's enough you know some things he's probably thinking about his writers about his readers they just have to experience themselves if they really want to know the great joy and hope and meaning and privilege of following Jesus then they will have to actually follow him themselves actually do what it takes actually even suffer the cost if necessary so friends I guess the real question tonight is not whether we can afford to follow Jesus but whether we can really afford not to follow Jesus if you looked at the cost then you would probably never follow him it's just too scary but if you looked at the benefit if you look at the life the light the purpose the hope the fruitfulness the meaning and the purpose then it would be a no brainer it was a no brainer for

Peter it was a no brainer for John and it was a no brainer for countless of saints that have come after them through history and I guess it's probably a no brainer for many of the people that have worshipped in this church that have gone before us and if you are still in doubt then I recommend that you go and talk and spend some time with some of these saints go and hear their stories about how they followed Jesus and they probably tell you yeah there were costs there were costs in following Jesus it wasn't easy but then they'll probably even smile and say well it was all worth it that they wouldn't have traded the life they've had no matter how hard it was for anything else they would have said we've seen Jesus work time and time again in our lives the amazing things that he has done in our lives and we wouldn't have wanted anything else even had we known what the costs were so friends tonight let me leave you with

Jesus words to Peter you follow me let's pray father we in one sense thank you for being honest with us for clearly showing us that to be your disciples is not going to be easy that's going to be costly and in fact we don't know how much that might cost us and even as we are afraid of that and we are anxious about that we ask that you show us what the great value and benefit of following you is so that we can say as Paul does that the suffering of this present time is nothing compared to the glory that awaits us so Lord Jesus we ask that you help us even as you command us to follow you

Amen