

**Sermon File # 739**

**Scripture Text: John 21:20-25**

**Sermon Title: *The Risen Lord and the Call to Follow Him***

**Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and**

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## ***The Risen Lord and the Call to Follow Him***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles to John 21:20-25. Today I want us to return to and conclude our springtime series about the appearances of the risen Lord Jesus to his disciples, as we consider today the final passage in John's Gospel. Following his Prologue in the first 18 verses, John began the gospel narrative with Jesus' calling his disciples to follow him (John 1:35-43). Now, at the very end of the gospel, the crucified and risen Lord, who has accomplished his atonement and completed his preparatory earthly mission, now reasserts the call to follow him.

This call he now reiterates to Simon Peter, who has been graciously reinstated as a leader of the disciples. We noted how Jesus forgave and restored a now broken and submissive Simon Peter, who asserts his love and hears the charge to show that love for Jesus by feeding his sheep. This conversation took place in front of the other disciples as they sat with Jesus, eating the breakfast he had prepared for them. Now Jesus and Peter rise from breakfast and begin to walk together on the lakeshore. Follow as I read...

## John 21:20-25

In the second book in his space trilogy, CS Lewis' character Ransom, who selected to go to the planet Perelandra (Venus), says, "One never can see, or not till long afterwards, why *any* one was selected for *any* job. And when one does, it is usually some reason that leaves no room for vanity. Certainly, it is never for what the man himself would have regarded as his chief qualifications" (*Perelandra*, page 24, chapter 2). I can certainly identify with Ransom!

Simon Peter was recruited to follow Jesus. This recruitment began early in Jesus' public ministry, as we note in chapter one, verse 42. Once again, the now crucified and risen Lord Jesus reiterates this call, this vocation of following him. And you and I who claim to be Christians have received this same vocation, calling, or job, if you will. As Lewis also said somewhere, there are really only two kinds of people in the world—those who say to God, "Your will be done," and those to whom God will say in the end, "Your will be done," as he sends them into everlasting separation from him in hell. This division exists not only in the world as a whole, but even within the church. Jesus taught about the wheat and the tares, and that only on the day of final judgment will it be clear who even within the professing church who are really God's and who are pretenders, or hypocrites (Matthew 13:24-30).

Just as Simon Peter and the other disciples were called to a life of following Jesus, so are we. And, like Peter and the others, we will never be exactly sure why we were selected for our particular assignment in following Jesus. Just as with CS Lewis' character Ransom, there is little room for pride, and plenty for humility. In the previous passage (15-19) we noted the price Simon Peter was told he would have to pay for following Jesus (18f). We also will never fully understand, till we get to heaven, the reasons we were called to follow Jesus in general, and why we were given our assignments in particular. But if we have been given the gift of saving grace, we have also been given a calling to follow, which we cannot ignore. To ignore our calling to follow Jesus is to neglect our salvation, and this we cannot do with impunity (Hebrews 2:3). To not follow Jesus is to risk the loss of our fellowship with Christ. The reason we were saved is that we might have this personal relationship and fellowship with Jesus Christ. To not follow is to forfeit the assurance of our final (eschatological) salvation, as well as to lose the joy and blessing of our present salvation.

Let us look at this conversation between Simon Peter and our Lord Jesus. Note how these words to Simon to follow him are Jesus' last words in this Gospel and thus we can assume, are vitally important words to Peter and to us. Note with me first of all that, like Peter...

### **We are all given an *individual* call. (Verses 20- 22)**

Jesus issued the call to Simon Peter during his time of restoring him to a renewed relationship (verse 19). This was a call...

- *To a personal relationship with Christ...*

As we see in verses 15-19, Jesus' call to Peter was based on a restored relationship that would be a demanding as well as fulfilling one. It would be a relationship...

#### With self-denial

We noted from verses 15-19, the cost to Peter for a life of following Jesus. To show his love for Jesus he must feed his sheep. And then Jesus prophesied that Peter would die a martyr's death, with his hands stretched out on a crucifixion crossbeam (John 21:18). And for the remainder of his thirty-plus years, Peter was called to a life of self-denial. Peter was coming to terms with an idea he had rejected from the beginning—the way of the cross (Matthew 16:22-23). Jesus at that time in Caesarea Philippi explained to the disciples that the way of the cross would mean that all of his disciples would have to deny themselves, and then take up their cross to follow Jesus. And there would be an intentional losing of self-centered living to find true life in Jesus Christ (Matthew 16: 24-25).

Self-denial was not the natural way for Peter. He was an active, aggressive man, who was the first to speak and commit to action, often without thought and reflection on exactly what he was saying. Nor is self-denial the natural way for any one of us. We are taught to assert self and to take care of self. So, Jesus calls us to a life that is not only counter-cultural, but also is counter-psychological and counter-personal to our deepest and strongest instincts. We are called to enter the narrative of the cross, to be crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20). This means we all have our Gethsemane experience when we must say to God, "If it is possible, let me live another way, or let me avoid this sacrifice and/or suffering. But if not, then, not my will, but your will be done" (Luke 22:39-46). It's clear that God isn't pampering us in this brief life. He's preparing us for everlasting glory.

The way to a personal relationship with Christ is through self-denial, but also...

#### With self-discipline

Peter was a vibrant, dynamic personality, and one thing that seemed deficient with Peter was self-discipline. One expression of his volatile nature was his attempt to decapitate one of the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus in the Garden (John 18:10-11). Yet, Jesus called Peter to follow and to a life of godliness and obedience. After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the church in fullness and with permanence, Peter was transformed into a stalwart, consistent and godly leader of the church. Look at his preaching on the Day of Pentecost and afterward (Acts 2:14-41), and his fearless, indomitable witness and leadership in face of the opposition of the enemies of the church (Acts 3-4). He became a godly, teachable and reliable leader of the church. He's the Apostle who wrote his first letter admonishing the church

to be holy and steadfast in the face of hostilities and persecutions, and his second letter, exhorting the church to abound in godly virtues and to live and serve in the light of the coming Day of the Lord.

But when Jesus called Peter to follow, he was a rough draft in process. Look at him here in our text during his visit with the risen Lord. He had just vowed and declared his love for the Lord, and accepted Jesus' charge to him to feed his sheep and care for his lambs. And Jesus gave the solemn prophecy of his looming martyrdom, then emphatically said, "Follow me!" (Verse 19). But next, Peter turns his head and notices the Beloved Disciple, the evangelist-writer of this Fourth Gospel, following Peter and Jesus. Peter shows his lack of focus on his conversation with Jesus, asking, "'Lord, what about him?" (Verse 21). He could not keep his focus on his own relationship and what Jesus was telling him about following. His attention drifted to John. It's just like Jesus and Peter were walking along and Peter turns his head and then, because he's not watching where he's going, he bangs into a tree. Jesus, who perceives Peter's total lack of focus, then offers this rebuke: "If I want him (John) to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (Verse 22). Peter bumps into a rebuke from the Lord that sounds much like, "Peter, it's none of your business what happens to John. You, Peter—follow me!"

The New Testament makes a vital distinction between being busy for the Body of Christ and being busybodies, period (2 Thessalonians 3:11). We are to be busy in the work of God, in fulfilling our responsibilities in holiness and love, but are not to delve into matters of other people's business. Why is it that some good church members are more engaged with other Christians' matters than with their own relationship with Christ?

Jesus was telling Peter that he has a calling and John has a calling, and both are called to a personal relationship with Christ...

- *As part of the Body of Christ.*

As we note on the very next page of our Bibles, Acts 1:1, the work of the risen Lord will continue through his church after the promised Holy Spirit descends upon them on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). And Peter and John will have distinct roles as different members of the Body of Christ. As John has already shown in his Gospel, as he takes us into the Holy of holies in the High Priestly Lord's Prayer in Chapter Seventeen, Jesus was preeminently concerned about the unity of his church (John 17:23). He knew that the effectiveness of the functioning of the church as his body on earth would be determined by this unity which he alone gives through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Apart from the Holy Spirit, who would later come upon Peter and John on the Day of Pentecost, these disciples would have no doubt continued in an earthly, competitive and divided spirit.

**Everyone is unique** in the body of Christ. Peter and John were uniquely different from the very beginning, and continued to be so till the very end of

their earthly pilgrimage. And, I might add that their different personalities continue even in heaven and will remain throughout eternity, I would suppose.

Simon Peter was the Big Fisherman, the impulsive, impetuous and up-front leader of the disciples. He was the first to speak up, the first to jump in (literally, I might add, as we see in Matthew 14:28). He became the main preacher, the big evangelist of the first century church. John, the Beloved Disciple, was primarily an introspective person, and his ministry seemed to major on thinking and writing. If Peter was the evangelist-preacher, John was the theologian and Apostle of Love. Peter perhaps preached more loudly, dynamically and powerfully. John thought more quietly, thoroughly and insightfully, producing the Gospel, his three epistles and the Book of Revelation. I think of the differences between George Whitefield, the powerful preacher of thunderous voice, and John Wesley, the great organizer. They had differences even in their theology, yet both were fully following Jesus and were used mightily during the Great Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Here at IBC we are nothing if not diverse, even in our denominational backgrounds and various confessions. Yet our source of unity is Christ Jesus and our being under his lordship as redeemed people, committed to living according to his word and being together in mission. And we learn to celebrate our diversity of styles and methods of doing church, worship, evangelism and missions. Our focus as a church, just as individuals, must be on Jesus alone.

Jesus rebuked Peter for losing focus on his own mission, and perhaps being distracted by John. Jesus called Peter back to his own assignment. In the work of the kingdom, **everyone is necessary**.

Jesus had a role for Peter and a separate role for John, and both were necessary. In the same way, he has a role for you and another role for me and for everyone else in this church. We need to realize everyone is necessary. And in fact, as Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the less ostensible parts of the Body of Christ, the more obscure participants in the work and life of the church are just as important (1 Corinthians 12).

I believe that every member of IBC is essential to the mission God has for us in this place. You must find what that is and do it to the glory of God and with the strength he provides. It may be prayerful support, or loving encouragement, or hospitality. It may be the more obvious leadership gifts of an elder or evangelist or teacher. But you are essential to all God wants to do in this place. If you shirk from your duty, you are depriving IBC of what God would do through us. And it's necessary that we work together in unity and love, and not in rivalry and envy or a spirit and attitude of competition.

Peter was guilty of looking back over his shoulder, worrying about a brother's future in the kingdom. Jesus says, "Mind your own business. Get focused on your own calling." And guess what? When you're focused on what God is doing with and through and as you, you won't be so critical of others and how they are doing kingdom work. It seems that some in God's churches

understand criticism, being critical of others, and having a critical spirit as spiritual gifts!

I for one need to be less critical of those who do ministry differently and who see things differently from me. I need the spirit of the Apostle Paul, who could rejoice in what others did even with the wrong attitude and motive. Paul rejoiced that through his rivals the gospel was being preached (Philippians 1:15-18). I need that attitude that looks beyond the rival to see the more important result of the advancement of the gospel. Then I will be less critical about those who do things differently and even, from my point of view, do things incorrectly.

Jesus told Peter he had a destiny as a martyr. But Jesus also implied that martyrdom might not be John's destiny (verse 22), but that **everyone has a unique destiny**

Rivalry and ambition were qualities that plagued the disciples. Amazingly, when Jesus had just told them about his looming cross and shared with them his Last Supper, the disciples got into an argument about who would be greatest in the coming kingdom (Luke 22:24). In asking Jesus about John, Peter may well have expressed his concern that John might fare better in his destiny. He may have been thinking about that occasion when the mother of James and John requested Jesus to give her boys a special place in his consummated kingdom (Matthew 20:20-28). This spirit of competition has been with the church from the very beginning, yet is un-Christ like in every way (See Jesus' self-emptying, in Philippians 2:1-11). No one is ready for effective service as a true representative of Jesus Christ who is always measuring his or her success, recognition and achievement against that of others. This was the spirit of the so-called "super apostles," who plagued Paul so much and who created division within the Corinthian church. Paul determined, in the face of this spirit of competition and rivalry, to be oblivious to human evaluation of him and to seek to please Christ alone (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

God has appointed that some will have a more conspicuous and heralded ministry than others, whose life work may be virtually unnoticed. But what matters is our faithfulness to Christ and with what we have been given. Faithfulness, not ostensible success, is what will be eternally rewarded and service is the only criterion for greatness in God's kingdom (Matthew 25:21). And the Lord holds in his hands the unique destiny of each one of us. And when the task he has for us is completed, he calls us home. Deaths to us, especially the death of younger people, or people in the prime of life, seem untimely and sometimes tragic. But not so with sovereign God, who holds us in his hands, even if we are subject to what to the world appears as senseless tragedy.

Peter and John were to have different destinies. Peter would die a martyr's death by crucifixion in AD 69 or 70. John would live on to a very old age. We know he was exiled as an old man to the Isle of Patmos, where he received *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, which became the last book in our Bible.

Both were faithful to the end, and grace did a work in their lives to bring about a great kingdom work of much fruitfulness. Not every life is so obviously blessed with immediate and obvious fruitfulness of service. Yet God knows the significance of every life that belongs to him.

John Milton (1608-1674), the great 17<sup>th</sup> Century English poet, began to lose his eyesight while still in his 30's and was totally blind by his early 40's. What an apparent tragedy for a writer, and one who was so dependent on his eyesight! His struggle with his usefulness and ongoing sense of purpose was expressed in his poem, "On His Blindness." Note how Milton was fearful that because of his blindness he could not be productive, and thus would be ill-prepared to give an account to God.

### ***On His Blindness* (1655)**

*When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest He returning chide,  
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait."*

Your circumstances and what you perceive to be serious limitations are under the sovereign purposes of a mighty God. He is able to glorify himself, not through what you think you can do for God, but through his power at work through your weakness and perceived inability. He will hold you accountable for what you let him do through your availability and faithfulness, even if all you can do is "stand and wait." You must stand faithful and steadfast in your witness, and stand in the gap to serve and to intercede for others. We are all uniquely called and gifted, and are all necessary for the work and witness of the kingdom of God. And...

### **We are all given an *imperative* call: *You must follow me.* (Verses 22 & 23)**

Notice the imperative in verse 22: "You *must* follow me!" Jesus told Peter. And the pronoun also is emphatic. "*You* must follow me." No Christian has the option of not following. No one can claim saving grace who is not living under the lordship of Christ. We are indeed saved by grace alone through faith alone. Yet, our faith is in Jesus as Lord, who gives us a relationship with

him as our Lord. If we are not walking with him, we are dangerously falling behind him, and are forfeiting any assurance that we ever experienced saving grace. The only way to make our calling and election sure, Peter wrote in his second epistle, is by seeing that the virtues of Christ-likeness abound (2 Peter 1:3-11). You can't base your salvation assurance on a memory or on a faded baptismal certificate. Our only evidence of saving grace is what he is doing in our lives at the present moment.

As Jesus told Peter, so he tells us to follow him...

- *In the light of the Lord's return (or delay!)...*

It's interesting how a church rumor got started by something Jesus said to Peter. This is perhaps further evidence of Peter's immaturity, that he would begin a rumor, or at least not squelch it. In one of the perhaps only two references in this Gospel to his return (the other being in 14:3), Jesus mentions to Peter that if John, the Beloved Disciple, should remain till Jesus' return, what was that to Peter? In other words, it was none of Peter's business (verse 23). The Lord Jesus said the time of his return was in the Father's hands. Every believer in every generation, century and millennium is to live in the light of the soon coming of Jesus. Indeed, the age of the church is a parenthesis, the mystery Paul spoke about, when we are to carry out the Great Commission with obedience, urgency and hope (Ephesians 3:6; Acts 1:7-8). Scripture gives us signs of the end of history, such as in 2 Thessalonians 2 and Mark 13, but the focus of the church is to be on the task before us. The "when" and the details of prophecy are left in the realm of mystery in order that the church not waste time speculating. Alas, self-proclaimed experts on the return of Christ have nevertheless wasted their time and the time of those of us who listen to them and read their books.

I remember what Lloyd John Ogilvie well said about the way to prepare for the end times. The best way to prepare for the "last things" is to concentrate on doing the "first things," he said. This seems to be what Jesus is saying to Peter. And, like Peter...

- *We have an urgent choice to make.*

The choice before Peter was clear. He must follow Jesus. The same is true for us today. As with Peter, there is also no option for compromise or delay. To delay is to disobey. This is our duty and responsibility. We cannot speculate about or compare ourselves with others. We cannot hope that God will join our agenda and fulfill our wishes. The calling is to each one of us and we must all obey the specific calling God has given. Before we leave this house of prayer and worship room today, we will have all made a choice whether or not we are following Jesus.

Clearly, to follow the way Jesus is calling us may not be the easiest, but it will be the best possible option. It's the way marked out for us by the wise, almighty and loving heavenly Father. It's the way of greatest fulfillment, joy

and purpose. Our following Jesus is not just an individual thing, one that affects only our personal peace and destiny. Rather...

### **Our calling is part of the “bigger picture.” (Verses 24 & 25)**

It is entirely possible that after the Apostle John died, some of his disciples added this final word of attestation to the Gospel. Some in the church were troubled, thinking that Jesus had said he would return before John died. But, as we know, that is not what Jesus said (verse 23). (Paul also had to address this problem of misunderstanding that the Lord would return before any believers would die. See 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4). So, after John died, perhaps the elders at Ephesus added these words of final closing, also affirming the credibility of John’s Gospel and testimony. And...

- *We are part of the grand testimony...*

As you and I follow Jesus, we become part of the grand testimony and the witness of the entire church. Without your witness the church would be weaker and its message less powerful and complete. You, like John, have a testimony to share about Jesus, what he has done for all and what he has done for others. May it be said of you and of me that our testimony, the testimony of our lives as well as our words, is true and consistent and points others unmistakably to Jesus (verse 24). Without your life of following Jesus, the big picture God is painting would be like a huge, but not yet complete puzzle, if the part you are to play is the missing piece.

Our testimony is part of the grand testimony...

- *Of the inexhaustible truth of Jesus.*

Many commentators and scholars say that in this final verse of the gospel John or his disciples, acting as his editors, were guilty of a little innocent hyperbole (Borchert, Burge, et. al.). But perhaps they miss the point and it’s not hyperbole at all. Better is the comment of DA Carson who writes, “If all his (Jesus’) deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed” (*The Gospel According to John*). The risen Lord Jesus is none other than the living Word and the eternal Son John describes in his Prologue (1:1-18). How could even every writer and scholar of all the ages possibly exhaust the meaning of his person and the extent of his work, in creation, in salvation and in daily providence and activity in the lives of individuals and nations?

The call to follow Jesus is the call to follow the sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords, the Ruler of the universe and the Savior of all who believe. John fulfilled his life purpose as a pastor and a writer of this Gospel and his letters and the Revelation. Are we doing our part to point others to him and to bring glory to him through our brief time on earth? Are you faithfully adding your chapter to the great and inexhaustible truth about Jesus Christ? Is your

life a convincing bit of evidence, a well-written chapter of what God can do to change a life, a life that has been in relationship with the risen Lord?

### **Conclusion:**

Perhaps you wonder sometimes why you were called to follow Jesus, and maybe why in particular your calling led you in a certain direction. Maybe your calling to serve Jesus in your job and vocation here in Belgium is a matter of a mixture of blessing and disappointment. But in any case, Jesus calls you to follow him in this context.

Sometime ago in the USA, a criminal was scheduled to be executed for his capital crimes. His execution was to be the first after new legislation that restored capital punishment in his state. Because this was an historic as well as controversial event, a large number of media personalities representing all of that state's television and radio stations and newspapers gathered to interview this man, whose time on earth was drawing to a close. In response to a comment that he was to be the first in his state since the reversal of the law to be put to death, he commented, "If it weren't for the honor of this occasion, I would just as soon it were happening to somebody else."

That may describe the emotion you and I may feel at times as we respond to the call to follow Jesus. We would just as well prefer that our particular calling be given to someone else. It seems others might be better suited, and our personal preference might be in another direction. Yet we are given this calling. And, whatever our future holds, we are called to live this day in obedience and with faithfulness. The call to you to follow Jesus may seem as ill-suited and challenging as the call of the CS Lewis character, Ransom, to go on a mission to Venus! Like the guy facing a hanging, you might prefer it were happening to somebody else.

When all is said and done, it is a costly honor to follow Jesus, to accept and fulfill the vocation Jesus had in mind for us from before creation. There was a popular hymn we sang during my childhood. I still remember the words, maybe because the message was so off target and misleading. This gospel testimonial song was titled, "It Pays to Serve Jesus." The title itself seems to promise material payoff to those in Christian ministry. I can still remember the promise,

*"It pays to serve Jesus, it pays everyday.  
It pays every step of the way.  
Though the pathway to glory may sometimes be drear,  
You'll be happy each step of the way."*

Even the promise of unmitigated happiness is out of touch and misleading. Following Jesus is the way of the cross, of self-denial, disciplined living and even occasional suffering. It costs to serve Jesus! But also it is the only way of true joy, peace and fulfillment. It is the only life of everlasting purpose. And, there is the "honor of the occasion" when we will receive the everlasting

blessedness of God, who is an excessively rewarding Father. We who belong to Jesus have no option except to follow him.

As we sing this hymn of commitment, I invite you to join me in preparing our hearts to receive together our Lord's Supper, expressing our thanks to the risen Lord for his willingness to follow the Father to the cross for us. As we partake of his Supper we renew our communion with him and with one another. And our true communion depends on our willingness to follow Jesus and to keep on following him, not just in vocational choices and changes of cataclysmic proportions, but in our desire to allow Christ to shape and refine our character. It means accepting the way he has for us and to trust following his way is the best possible way. There is no other way.

**Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

- 1) Do you agree that every Christian has received a calling from God? If so, what is the calling you have received?
- 2) What do you think are some of the possible and probable costs involved in following Jesus?
- 3) Can you think of others whose calling to Christian service seems highly unusual and even unlikely to be authentic?
- 4) Why is it important that we focus on our personal calling and not on the calling of others?
- 5) How is it possible for a highly diversified church, like IBC, to be strongly unified?
- 6) What do you think of your life, service and gifts in relation to the work and witness of the entire church? Is it possible you are thinking too little of the importance of your contribution?
- 7) In prayer, ask the Lord to give you grace to understand, answer and fulfill his calling to you.

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