

“Follow Thou Me”

Introduction

I propose to take these words, spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ in John 21:22, look at them in their context, and then see what we can learn about what it means to follow Jesus as one of His disciples.

Encounter by the Lake

In John's Gospel chapter 21 we have an account of one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to His disciples (the third such appearance, according to verse 14). The place of this encounter was “the sea of Tiberias” (verse 1), also known as the Sea of Galilee. A number of disciples (seven, according to verse 2) were together when one of them, Peter, announced that he was going fishing. The other disciples said they would join him. They all entered into a boat; “and that night they caught nothing” (verse 3). As day was breaking they spotted someone on the sea shore (verse 4), who asked them whether they had caught anything; the answer was, “No” (verse 5). The person on the beach (who was, in fact, the Lord Jesus, although His disciples, as yet, did not recognise Him, verse 4), told them to “Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find”. The disciples obeyed, and “now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes” (verse 6). The apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, realised that the person on the shore was none other than the Lord Jesus; upon hearing this, the apostle Peter dived into the sea (verse 7). On arriving at the beach, the disciples noticed that the Lord had already made “**a fire of coals** there, and fish laid thereon, and bread” (verse 9). They all have breakfast together, and then Jesus has a personal conversation with Peter in which He questions him (**three times**) as to whether he loves Him (verses 15-17). I'm sure this whole scene must have reminded Peter of his never-to-be-forgotten denial (**three times**) of the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed (Mark 14:30); on that occasion there was also “**a fire of coals**” (John 18:18). But now, in his answers to Jesus' threefold question, we see that this is not the same, self-confident Peter who denied his Lord on that dreadful night.

“Lovest Thou Me?”

In questioning Peter regarding his love for Him we notice, first of all, that Jesus calls him “Simon, son of Jonas” (verses 15-17), rather than Cephas or Peter (meaning, “Rock”). Peter had failed to live up to his new name (John 1:42) when he denied his Lord. Secondly, we notice that Jesus uses two different Greek words for “love” when He asks Peter whether he loves Him – “agapao” and “phileo”, while Peter only uses the weaker word for love, “phileo”, which indicates **an affectionate love**. The first two times that Jesus asks the question He uses the stronger word for love, “agapao”, which indicates **a deep-seated love**: verse 15, “lovest thou me more than these?”, i.e. “do you love me with an agapao love more than these other disciples?”, to which Peter replies, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee”; then verse 16, “lovest (agapao) thou me?”, to which Peter repeats his first answer, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee”. The third time, Jesus asks, “lovest (phileo) thou me?”, to which Peter replies, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee” (verse 17). Peter's replies to the Lord's questions show that he is a much humbler man than the one who had affirmed, “Although all shall be offended, yet will not I” (Mark 14:29). Peter is now

aware of the true state of his heart: he knows that his love for His Lord, though genuine, is not what it ought to be; he now realises his own, innate weakness and frailty.

“Follow Thou Me”

After telling Peter what kind of death he (Peter) would one day meet with (at Rome: “he was crucified head downward, for so he himself had asked to suffer” – Eusebius: “Ecclesiastical History”), “(Jesus) saith unto him, Follow me” (verses 18-19). Peter now spots someone following them: “Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved (John) following”(verse 20). “Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do (what about this man?)? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me” (verses 21-22).

So let’s take Jesus’ words, “follow thou me”, and look at just **some** of the things that are involved in being His follower, or disciple, as mentioned in John chapter 21 and elsewhere. These characteristics of Christian discipleship are not **optional extras** for really keen or “fully consecrated” disciples: they are essential elements for **all** of Christ’s disciples, and the absence of any one of them should cause us to question the reality of our commitment to Christ. Jesus is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all.

1. **Love.** I have placed this aspect of discipleship first because it is the basis and motivation for all the others. A follower of Jesus Christ must have a sincere love for Him which seeks, with the Holy Spirit’s help, to put Him first and foremost in our lives: “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). Do we love Jesus Christ more than anyone or anything else? He loved us enough to become a man and die for us on the cross: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Christ’s love for us was a sacrificial love the breadth and length and height and depth of which we can never fully comprehend (Ephesians 3:18-19) let alone imitate, but we should, by God’s grace, seek to love Him sincerely and with as much love as a forgiven sinner can. As Jesus said to Peter, so He says to each one of us: “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” (John 21:16). The follow-up to Jesus’ question, “lovest thou me?” was, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:16). If we love Jesus, our shepherd, we should also love and care for our fellow-sheep: “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34-35). This is a recurring theme in our Lord’s upper room discourse: “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). “Be ye therefore followers (imitators) of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour (aroma)” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Perhaps you have been a follower of Jesus Christ for many years now: has your love for Him grown with the years? or, could it be said of you, what Jesus said to the church at Ephesus, “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love” (Revelation 2:4)? In John 13:1 we read that Jesus, knowing “that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end (or, “to the uttermost”)”; even so should we seek to love Christ: completely and continually.

2. **The Word of God and Prayer.** Under this heading I want us to look at the disciple's "devotional life". If we love Christ then our love will show itself in acts of devotion. If you are devoted to someone you long to spend time with them, talk to them, and listen and attend to their voice; and if you have to spend time away from their immediate presence for a while, you look forward to meeting them again with joyful anticipation. Peter evidenced his devotion to the Lord Jesus when he heard John say, "It is the Lord". What did he do when he knew it was the Lord that was on the beach that day? He couldn't wait for the boat to get to shore; instead, he jumped out of the boat and swam his way to His Lord and Master so that he could be with Him as soon as humanly possible (John 21:7). Does this act of Peter's describe our own longing to be in the Lord's presence? When we wake up in the morning, is our first thought: "I must get my Bible out, read a Psalm and hear what my Lord has to say to me today?" Do we then pour out our hearts to the Lord in prayer and praise in response to what we read of His love for us and His promises to us, and do we then seek His grace and strength to live for Him throughout another day? If we are to be faithful disciples of Christ our daily reading and meditating upon the scriptures, and our daily response to Him in prayer, are absolutely essential. Prayer has been described as "the Christian's vital breath" (James Montgomery, from the hymn "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire", no. 1051 in Christian Worship); it is our daily source of power enabling us to live the life of a disciple, because prayer lays hold of the omnipotent hand of God. The Psalmist, David, said, "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD (Jehovah); in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up" (Psalm 5:3). Our Saviour, as a man, felt His own need of praying to His heavenly Father on many different occasions: very early in the morning (Mark 1:35); at the end of a busy day (Matthew 14:23); before an important decision (the choosing of the twelve) He spent all night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13); He interceded for His disciples (Luke 22:32; John 17:9); He prayed that the Father would be glorified in His obedience unto death (John 12:27-28); He prayed before engaging in His most dreadful and important task on earth – His atoning death on the cross (Matthew 26:36); He prayed for the forgiveness of those who put Him to death (Luke 23:34); He prayed when He felt deserted by His heavenly Father (Matthew 27:46); and He prayed at the end of His life (Luke 23:46). If Jesus, the perfect man, felt the need to pray to His heavenly Father, how much more should we poor sinners. When one of His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them a pattern prayer (the Lord's Prayer, or, more accurately, the Disciple's Prayer) to help them in their praying (Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:9-13). Jesus speaks to us through the scriptures and gives us guidance as to how we are to live as His disciples; and prayer acknowledges our dependence upon the Lord for the grace and strength required to follow out His instructions, because, as Jesus said, "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

3. **Humility.** A low view of ourselves is of vital importance if we are to be true disciples of Jesus Christ. As pointed out above, Peter had learned this lesson the hard way; his previous self-confidence in his own ability to stand up for His Lord (Mark 14:29), had now been replaced by a realisation of his own inherent weakness (John 21:15-17 – and see our explanation above). Although, as believers, we have been freed from the guilt and dominion of sin, yet indwelling sin still remains within each one of us, and we need to realise that, but for the grace of God, we are liable to fall and fail at any moment: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Humility was one of the key graces

that characterised the coming and the life of our Lord Jesus Christ upon earth: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God (did not consider His existence in a manner equal with God as something to be held onto at all costs): but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8, and see our article “The Humiliation of Christ”). In fact, it would be fair to say that humility is a quality that is particularly loved and commended by God, while its opposite – arrogance and pride, is a characteristic that is particularly offensive to God: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit” (Isaiah 57:15); “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6); “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Peter, having learnt the lesson of humility, went on to write, in his first epistle, “be clothed with humility” (1 Peter 5:5).

4. **Self-denial.** According to the Lord Jesus, self-denial is an essential element of Christian discipleship. Otherwise referred to as “taking up our cross”, this is probably the most common expression that Jesus used when calling would-be disciples to follow Him: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24); Luke adds that this cross-bearing is for **every one** of Christ’s disciples, and it is to be done **daily** (Luke 9:23). Not only is self-denial **on-going** and **unavoidable**, it is also **painful**. Jesus told Peter that, in his case, following Him would lead to his physical death: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me” (John 21:18-19). For us, cross-bearing may not lead to actual physical death on a cross, but it will still mean taking decisions, and making choices, which will put us at cross-purposes with our old, selfish, sinful natures, and the ungodly world around us, and will cause us pain and suffering. It may mean taking a stand for Christ at the workplace or college or school and being ridiculed, bullied, and being passed over for promotion: “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they called the master of the house Beelzebub (the prince of the demons), how much more shall they call them of his household?” (Matthew 10:24-25). Self-denial may mean coming home, tired from a busy day and, instead of putting our feet up in the evening and watching TV, making the effort to go to the church prayer meeting; or, getting up half an hour earlier in the morning, so we can spend time with the Lord at the beginning of the day; according to Psalm 57:8, it was David’s custom to begin the day with God’s praises: “Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early” (literally, “I myself will awake the dawn”). Jesus considered **us** worth taking up **His** cross for; do you think **He** is worth taking up **your** cross for? “Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands,

with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). For both Christ and His disciples, the way to the crown is via the cross.

5. **Obedience.** In John 21, when the disciples see the figure standing on the beach, John, “that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord” (John 21:7). He doesn’t say the Lord’s name: **he doesn’t need to** because, “to (His disciples) there is... **one** Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Bible knows nothing of a disciple who has received Jesus as their **Saviour** but **not** as their **Lord**. Someone who has truly **believed** in Christ will seek, from his heart, to **obey** His every word as it is revealed in the scriptures: “Jesus said to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (John 8:31). Faith is the initial act of obedience to Christ whereby we become His followers, and the faith by which we are joined to Christ is a living, active faith which will show itself in ongoing acts of obedience, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26). In John 21, when Jesus told the disciples to let down their net on the right side of the boat, despite the fact that they had caught nothing all night, they **obeyed**, and, as a result, their net was full of fishes (John 21:3-6; cf. Luke 5:4-6). Peter obeyed Jesus’ words, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:16), by faithfully teaching the churches of his own day, and by writing two inspired epistles for the instruction of Christ’s disciples of every age. Jesus commanded His apostles to teach new disciples “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Following Christ will mean, for example, that we obey the Lord’s directive that new disciples should be baptised, as a believer (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:12). Of course, obeying Christ shouldn’t just be a matter of duty: we should **obey** Him because we **love** Him; as Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Our love for Christ should be the motivation behind our obedience; Paul calls it our “labour of love... in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3); that means, our **love for Christ** should inspire us to **laborious service for Christ**. “What He says we will do, where He sends we will go – Never fear, only trust and obey!” (from the hymn “When we walk with the Lord” by John Henry Sammis, hymn no. 918 in Christian Worship). Our obedience will never be perfect in this life, but, like Paul, we press on: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after (press on), if that I may apprehend (lay hold of) that for which also I am apprehended of (laid hold of by) Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). As our “Master and Lord” (John 13:13), we should seek to give Him our total and unswerving obedience; otherwise our profession is a mere sham: “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). How much obedience do we give to the Lord? Do we give Him as much as we possibly can? Or do we give Him as little as we can get away with? Shame on us if the truth is nearer to the latter than the former! do we think so little of our Lord and master who, because of His love for us, was obedient unto death? We all need to take heed to this solemn warning: “Cursed be the one who does the LORD’s (Jehovah’s) work negligently” (Jeremiah 48:10, NASB). Though never perfect, our obedience, like our love, should be sincere and whole-hearted: “sincere obedience consists not of a sinless conformity to God’s will, but of genuine desires and proportionate efforts after it” (A. W. Pink: “Practical Christianity”). So let’s **trust** and **obey**, for there’s no other way to be a faithful, and truly happy, disciple of Jesus.

6. **Personal.** Another important aspect of discipleship is that it is personal, i.e. Jesus deals with His disciples as individuals. Christ's love for His disciples is not just a general love for us all: Christ "loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25), it is also a very personal love: "the Son of God... loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20); and we are to love, serve and follow Him as individuals, as well as part of a local church. As Christ's disciples, we are all on the narrow path that leads to the Celestial City; but our own journey along that path is a very personal one: your journey will not be the same as mine, just as Peter's journey was not the same as John's. In John chapter 21, after the Lord signified to Peter what kind of death he (Peter) would die (John 21:18-19), "Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved (John) following... Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?" (verses 20-21). Peter is curious to know what the Lord's plans were for John. Jesus' reply, in verse 22, warns us not to be overly curious as to what He is going to do with our fellow disciples: "Jesus saith unto him (Peter), If I will that he (John) tarry till I come, what is that to thee? **follow thou me**". He is "the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and He is well able to look after each and every one of His sheep. We are not to let anything or anyone distract us from our main business as disciples - **our own personal walk with the Lord**: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them (**personally**: "he calleth his own sheep by name" – John 10:30), and **they follow me**: and I give unto them eternal life" (John 10:27-28). We are not to be like silly sheep who blindly follow other sheep; and we should be wary of being led astray by self-appointed teachers and influencers on the internet and social media: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-16); there is only one person who we can safely follow, knowing that He will never lead us astray, but will always lead us in the paths of truth and righteousness: **the Lord Jesus Himself**. Even the apostle Paul, when exhorting the Corinthian believers, "Be ye followers (imitators) of me", added this caveat, "even as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Our Lord says to each one of His disciples, personally and individually: "**FOLLOW THOU ME**".

Conclusion

Many so-called "evangelists" in our day preach an easy "gospel" that will guarantee you "physical health" and "material wealth" without the need for any great effort or striving on your part; no wonder if such a false "gospel" produces spurious "disciples", whose hearts, like that of Lot's wife, are still entrenched in this vain world (see our article "Remember Lot's Wife"). But this is **not** the Gospel that Jesus and the apostles preached. Jesus never gave the impression that being His disciple would lead to an easy, comfortable, materially prosperous life in this world, enabling us to just sit back and "let go, and let God". In fact, Jesus promised the exact opposite, and He exhorted His disciples to "strive" to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 13:24). Jesus warned that being His disciple would mean persecution (John 15:20), and he urged any would-be followers to "**count the cost**" of discipleship (Luke 14:27-33). Christ's apostles sounded the same warnings: "**all** that will live godly in Christ Jesus **shall** suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12); "(Paul and Barnabas)... returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them that **we must** through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:21-22).

We are in a spiritual warfare, and we must “wrestle... against principalities, (and) against powers”; we must take up “the whole armour of God”, and wield “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:12-17). The only prosperity which we are promised in this life is a spiritual one, “When we walk with the Lord, in the light of His Word” (John Henry Sammis, hymn no. 918 in Christian Worship).

Having said all that about the difficulties and struggles that attend the life of Christ’s disciples, the scriptures make it abundantly clear that following Christ is infinitely worth all the effort, and that “our **light affliction**, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a **far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**” (2 Corinthians 4:17). When we experience “fiery trials” in this life, we can, nevertheless, “rejoice, inasmuch as (we) are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, (we) may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12-13). The Old Testament scriptures, equally with the New Testament, give us wonderful promises of the Lord’s help and presence when we are enduring afflictions and persecutions for the Lord’s sake: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkedst through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon (scorch) thee” (Isaiah 43:2); God has promised that “he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee (Deuteronomy 31:6). Even though our afflictions may be painful and of long duration, the Lord has promised to be with us in them, if we are trusting in Him and walking with Him: “When through the deep waters I cause thee to go, the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow; for I will be with the, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress. When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee: I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine” (from the hymn “How firm a foundation”, ‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection, no. 692 in Christian Worship).

So remember, tried and afflicted disciple of Christ, our wilderness journey will soon be at an end, and the day of the Lord is coming, “in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought (we) to be in all holy conversation (conduct) and godliness, looking for and hasting unto (hastening) the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Jesus has left us “an example, that (we) should follow his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). He calls His disciples, whom He has purchased with His own blood, to follow Him, no matter where He may lead; and, one day, we will be with our Lord and Master “in mansions of glory and endless delight”. “Let us go forth therefore unto him (Jesus) without (outside) the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13:13-14).

May God grant us His abundant grace “that (we) might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work” (Colossians 1:10): “so shall (we) be (his) disciples” (John 15:8). Amen.