



You Follow Me

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John 21:15-25

The Bible is full of stories of different characters used by God in various ways. They had all sorts of different experiences with God over the course of millennia. For some reason, however, we seem to think God should treat all of us according to one set pattern. Ignoring our individual differences, strengths, needs, and situations in life, we expect one pattern to be applied the same way to each one of us, across cultures, languages, ages, genders, and time periods. We know better. Deep down, we can all see clearly that God works with us individually. So why do we still want to compare ourselves with one another or force others to be just like us? Why should God want us to be identical when he created us with so much diversity?

Peter was still reeling from his failures on his last night with Jesus before the resurrection. He felt bad about having denied even to know Jesus shortly after declaring he would follow Jesus to death. Sure, Jesus had forgiven Peter a long time ago, even before Peter's denial. The problem was that Peter was not yet prepared to forgive himself. Peter was not ready to move beyond his failure, set it aside, and get on with the mission Jesus had set out before him.

In one sense Peter had moved on. He was leading the disciples in Jesus' absence. He was back to seeking to place his life under the lordship of Christ Jesus. He was looking for a path forward, and yet his failure was still an unresolved issue. He looked around at the other disciples and recognized that none of them had failed Jesus the way he had failed him. None of them had denied knowing Jesus. None of them had pretended never to have known or even met Jesus. He looked at the others and made a comparison with his own failings and felt his own significance and worth diminished.

The fishing trip in a sense was an attempt to get back to a comfortable pattern of life he knew. It was an attempt to find significance once again, doing something he well knew how to do. He would just go back to the patterns of life before he had met Jesus. He knew how to live that life. He understood the rules and requirements. He had been successful before with boats, nets, and a life of fishing. He did not feel like a failure in that setting.

They toiled all night with no results from their fishing. A man on shore a hundred yards away told them to cast the net off the other side of the boat. As the nets filled with fish, John recognized it was Jesus giving them direction. Peter swam to shore. They remembered another time when the same thing had happened. Jesus had told them to cast the nets of the right side of the boat on that occasion, also. Then Jesus had called them to leave their nets and follow him.

The pattern was repeating. Peter made the connection, as did the others. They recognized Jesus to be the same one who years before had given the same instructions. On shore, with fish roasting and bread to eat, Jesus began talking with Peter.

"Do you love me? ...Feed my sheep." It was a different image than before. Before, the conversation had been about becoming a fisher of men and leaving the nets behind. This time it was about caring for others, nurturing those brought before Jesus and the Christ. Though similar it was different. This was a call to Peter about moving on in his service to God. Three years before, it had been about breaking the pattern of his life, leaving the nets behind to begin a new venture with God. This was about taking the venture with God to the next stage. This was a focus to nurture others.

Service to Jesus was not an issue for Peter. He had made that commitment once before. Swimming the 100 yards to shore was a declaration of his intent to keep on with his commitment, to get back on course with following Jesus. Sitting by the fire and hearing Jesus' words about getting back on task, however, brought to mind the issue that had been plaguing Peter.

"How can I continue to serve after what I have done? How can I feed and care for others, when I have failed so miserably? Aren't these others better choices, after my failure? I am no longer worthy or fit to serve. You should be talking to someone else."

Those weren't the words that came from Peter's mouth, but it was the issue plaguing him. "Lord, I committed my life to serve you once before, to lay down my life for you. I failed to follow you for three hours. How can I trust my commitment to serve you now? I do not trust myself to be faithful. How can you?"

Peter pointed to one of the others, John who had been the first to recognize Jesus from the boat. He did not feel he measured up to John or to the others. Wouldn't John be a better choice? Hadn't John followed Jesus as far as the cross and burial? Hadn't John been more faithful? Hadn't he shown a greater capacity than Peter? Didn't John measure up better? Pick him!

Jesus' response was not to compare. Jesus' response called Peter to focus on his own life and his own issues before God. Jesus called Peter to assess his own commitment, his own course, his own mission before God. It was as though he said to Peter, "Peter, I am talking to you. Leave John out of this conversation. This is not about John and my will for him. This is not about comparing yourself to anyone else. This is about you and you alone."

Sometimes that is the hardest part of listening to Jesus' words. When Jesus calls us, he speaks to each one of us individually. When Jesus places a mission before our lives, it is a mission that each one of us must respond to individually. We are not called to be so concerned about the service and capability of others. We are to look at our own lives, our own commitment, our own calling, our own service and responsibilities. After all, God's call comes to each one of us, and God's will is that each of us participate in the mission set before us.

We are each one of us called to be servants of Christ Jesus. We are each one of us called to place our lives before God in dedicated service. We are each individually called to present ourselves according to who we are and according to God's plan for each of us.

There is no room here for comparison among ourselves. There is no issue here of measuring our value against one another. There is no question here of individual worth in comparison with one another, for God's call is not about our worthiness. It is rather about the responsibility given to each one of us to serve God's purposes according to the manner God has equipped us and chooses to use each one of us individually.

When we compare ourselves with one another, we miss the point. When we look around to how others are serving, measuring ourselves against one another or casting others in a better or worse light for their successes or failures, we miss the point.

Jesus looked at Peter and said, "If I should have different plans for him, what of it? That has nothing to do with you. I am asking you to follow me. Leave him out of it." We are all responsible before Christ, yet we are responsible first of all for ourselves. What will we do with the call placed on each of us? The call, "Follow me," is one that only the individual can answer. How will I respond?