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A Personal Challenge John 21:20-25

Intro: (21:18-19) In this dramatic moment, Jesus gives the final statement of His “7 last words” and He delivers it to Peter. Some years before, Jesus had called Peter to follow Him ([Mt 4:18-19](#)). This call was made in the context of evangelism. To be a fisher of men means to seek to persuade sinners and catch them with the truth. The metaphor breaks down after this because a fisherman catches living fish and after they’re caught, they die. A Christian witness, on the other hand, seek to catch dead “fish” (dead in trespasses and sins) and when they are caught, they’re made alive in Christ! Jesus called Peter to be a fisher of men – to be an evangelist of the truth.

Now, Jesus calls Peter to follow Him again. This time the call is made in the context of a shepherd: one who tends to and feeds God’s flock. Both the lambs and the mature sheep need feeding and leading. Proper feeding only comes through teaching God’s Word. Proper leading is accomplished when the Word of God is lived out in the life of the shepherd. Peter was called to minister for the Lord as an evangelist (fisherman) and a pastor (Shepherd) and he took this second commission seriously, as evidenced by his exhortation to church elders in [I Peter 5:1-4](#).

But, this call had a deeper meaning for Peter than just evangelist and pastor. Now Peter knows that continuing to follow Jesus would mean certain death on a cross. As harsh as that might sound Peter realizes that Jesus placed him in the same category as Himself! Peter was called to live a life spent for God and then ultimately sacrificed for the glory of God. Similar terminology was used by Jesus earlier in this Gospel ([12:27-28a](#)). Jesus is offering Peter the opportunity to follow directly in His footsteps if he will take it and continue in it. The command “Follow Me” literally means “Keep on following Me.” Peter had followed Jesus in the past but not continuously. Jesus is calling him to a future in which he follows steadfastly in the ways of the Lord.

What was Peter’s response? Did he whole-heartedly accept this challenge from Jesus and readily agree to follow in His footsteps with a life of complete surrender and ultimate sacrifice? We know that Peter did do this

but he didn't do it immediately. He didn't refuse his Lord's command, neither did he accept it. His response was somewhat distracted.

20-22 – Peter's first response to the personal challenge from Jesus to follow Him was to deflect it by wondering what Jesus was going to do with someone else. Peter's reaction may seem surprising but it shouldn't be. He represents most believers. We often find it easy to deflect a personal challenge from Jesus by wondering or even worrying about what other disciples are doing or what Jesus may require from them. This is nothing more than a delay tactic. When Jesus brings a direct challenge and lays it at our feet, it is for us and us alone. Even if it is a general message to the whole church, it can only be properly responded to on an individual basis. The church body as a whole is only as effective as each member is responsive to the Lord's leading and calling.

To be distracted by others is to risk disobedience to the Lord and possibly being detoured out of the will of God. This doesn't mean we should ignore other believer because we do have the responsibility of caring for one another (**Phil 2:1-4**). What it does mean is that we shouldn't allow our curiosity about others to distract us from following the Lord. God has His plan for us, just as He has His plans for every other believer. How He works in and through their lives is His business. Our business is to follow Him as He leads us.

At the heart of this principle is the reality that everybody is different. We have different backgrounds and upbringings. We've all had different experiences in our lives and we come to Jesus with different baggage. We all have different outlooks on life, different personalities, different talents and abilities and different hang-ups and failings. Everybody is different because that's how God made us and just as God has made us all different, so He will use us all differently.

Some of these differences are actually highlighted in our text.

Jesus makes reference to Peter's youth and his old age and both are a necessity in the church. The characteristics of youth are a vibrant energy, a generally positive outlook and an expectation of good things to come. These are characteristics that are vital to any congregation. There are also weaknesses associated with youth. There is a lack of life experiences which can lead to foolishness. There are passions that need to be disciplined and

challenged too. But for all the weaknesses, there are still dreams and energies that help to move the church along. Youth is one of God's gifts to the church and it should not be despised. Nor should we attempt to put old heads on young shoulders.

Old age comes with its own benefits and failings. Yes, there is wisdom, experience and a certain deliberateness of actions but it is also true that the older we get, the more things occur contrary to our preferences. In Peter's case it was martyrdom that Jesus mentions. This was not something Peter would have chosen for himself. Similarly, there are things that come with age that we'd rather not have to deal with: illness, limited opportunities, disillusionment – yet these are as necessary for the church as are the dreams and energies of youth. They are there to remind us that we do not live in a perfect world; this is not our home – we were never intended to get or be comfortable in it.

Another area of differences is in temperament. Here, Peter is contrasted with John. As we have seen, Peter is the impetuous disciple; he's always the first to speak and to act – not always wisely but always first. John, on the other hand, is the thinker. He contemplates, perceives and then acts with deliberation. John was the first to recognize that it was Jesus on the shore directing their successful fishing excursion. When he voiced his perception, it was Peter who dove into the water and swam to shore while John stayed in the boat and landed the catch that Jesus provided. John is almost never the one to speak. He owns no sword, he cuts off no ears. Yet, Jesus had a place and a purpose for him just as surely as He has a place and purpose for noisy Peter.

Jesus' response to Peter (22) is not so much a rebuke as it was another challenge. Peter was destined to die on a cross but Jesus is inviting Peter to consider the possibility that He might have an entirely different destiny for John. Peter only had to consider and concern himself with what Jesus required of him and understand that Jesus might require something completely different from John and all of the other disciples. As it turns out, all the disciples would die a martyr's death with the exception of John, but that would certainly not be for lack of trying.

You follow Me – This was a powerful and pointed challenge to Peter. Regardless of how Jesus dealt with John or any of the other disciples, Peter

had to decide for himself whether or not he would follow Jesus. This isn't just a challenge for Peter – it's a challenge for every disciple of Jesus Christ. John's intention is to emphasize this for as he closes his Gospel, these are the last recorded words of Jesus. Strangely enough, they are also almost the first words of Jesus in this book. When the 2 disciples of John the Baptist started following Jesus, He turned and asked them, in effect, "What do you want?" When they asked about where He was staying He said, Come and see which was an invitation to discipleship. But, to make the point clearer, Jesus' next utterance, an invitation to Philip, is literally, "Follow Me."

In a very real sense, then, these are the first and last words of Jesus in John's Gospel. They are a reminder that Christianity is Jesus Christ, not just believing in some abstract sense, but believing in Him to the point of turning your back on everything else to follow Him. These words of Jesus may be hard to obey but they're not hard to understand as Jesus provides the interpretation of them in other places ([Lk 9:23-25](#); [Mk 8:34-37](#)). Like our text in John, this is an invitation to follow Jesus. But, unlike our text, Jesus explains what this discipleship looks like. True discipleship involves self-denial and sacrifice – taking up one's cross in Christ's service.

Self-denial should be easy for any true Christian to understand since this is where Christianity actually begins. To be a Christian means rejecting every attempt to please God through your own abilities and efforts and accepting by faith what God has done in Christ for your salvation. We can't save ourselves. So becoming a Christian means dying to those old, worthless efforts to merit something from God. It means saying no to them in order that we might receive salvation as God's free gift. Christianity begins with self-denial. So, in a way, the Christian life is simply continuing on in the way we have started. It's turning our back on self to follow Jesus.

But, what does it mean to deny one's self to be a disciple of Jesus? First, it means we must renounce sin. Meaning, we must repent of sin and determine to go forward in the holy way Jesus has set before us. Repentance and faith rightfully belong together. We can't follow Christ without forsaking sin. Repentance is a definite and deliberate turning away from every thought, word, deed and habit that is known to be wrong. It's not enough to feel remorseful or make some apology to God. Repentance is not a matter of emotion or speech. It's an internal change of mind and attitude

towards sin that leads to a change in behavior. Self-denial is a renunciation of anything that's contrary to God's revelation of Himself; anything contrary to what is taught and exemplified in the Bible.

The second requirement of self-denial involves renouncing anything that isn't God's will for our lives. This relates to the previous point about sin, because sin is not God's will for us and must be renounced. Still, there are other things that are not sinful but, because they're also not God's will for us personally they must be renounced as well so that we might do His will. These things may be good, healthy and wonderful by themselves but if it's not God's will for you then you are much better off without them. God has a plan for each life. Our business is to discover His plan for us and fulfill that plan as He reveals it and enables us.

The second part of discipleship is taking up your cross daily. What does that mean? If we lived in Jesus' day and saw a man carrying a cross, it meant he was a condemned criminal and was on his way to a place of execution. So when Jesus said that those who followed Him were to take up their crosses He meant they're to follow Him to death, denying themselves even to the point of facing execution. Thus, the phrase "take up your cross" intensifies the phrase "deny yourself" and goes well beyond it. To deny yourself is negative. But this phrase implies the positive counterpart to self-denial. It refers to the deliberate embracing of God's will, including self-denial, wholeheartedly.

There's a general misunderstanding about this business of bearing your cross. You see it in the way people shrug their shoulders and say, 'Well, I guess this is just my cross to bear,' as if the cross is some inevitable circumstance of life that cannot be avoided. But, that the thing - the cross can be avoided. What Jesus is referring to is the voluntary positive acceptance of what He's asking of us, whatever it may be. It's not servility or a cop-out. It's not resignation or fatalism ("I guess this is just the way it will have to be!") It's a very positive, voluntary act of the will. It's literally a Yes to God. In other words, we must be willing to say No to ourselves in order to properly say Yes to God.

The dominant theme of the life of a disciple should be, "Yes, Lord; what do you want me to do?" That doesn't mean that difficulties won't come our way; they most certainly will. But, if we go through life gritting our teeth and

clenching our fist, declaring all the way “I can take it, God” then we’ll never know the joy that comes from voluntary obedience, from having a heart that says, “Yes, Lord, I delight to do this for You!” God’s will is not grievous but sometimes it may seem grievous to us. On those days, we must live by faith and accept the apparent grievous will of God gladly. We must deliberately determine to do His will joyfully.

So, how do we learn the kind of self denial and taking up the cross that Jesus demands of us here? We learn it by following Him and constantly keeping our eyes on Him. This isn’t circular reasoning, it’s progressive. To follow Jesus we must deny ourselves and take up our cross, but we learn this by following Him. So it is by degrees and by a continuous discipleship that we learn to follow and by following, we learn to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Jesus is our perfect example. He’s not asking us to do anything that He hasn’t already done, in greater measure, Himself. Discipleship involves a real and sometimes painful death to our own desires, but it’s the only way to fullness of living both now and in eternity. We die to self but we do so in order that we might live to Christ. In Scripture, death is always followed by life, crucifixion by resurrection. When we finally give up trying to run our own life it’s only then that we find the true joy of being a Christian. We enter into a life so freed from the obsession of our will that we can hardly understand how it ever had such a hold on us in the first place.

23 – Jesus didn’t say that John would live until His return but that’s the way some misguided believers understood it. This illustrates just how often and easily people misunderstand things, even among believers. In the church, more problems are caused by confused saints than by lost sinners. Misinterpreting God’s Word only creates misunderstanding about God’s people and God’s plans for His people.

24-25 – As we come to the conclusion of John’s Gospel, he necessarily ends it with a declaration of its veracity. The doctrines of Christianity do not rest on an unstable foundation of wishful thinking or speculation. They rest on facts observed and authenticated by eye-witnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry. **Vs24** affirms that the men who recorded the life and teachings of Jesus were actual eyewitnesses of the events they described. In other religions, it’s usually the founder’s ideas that count but in Christianity, it’s the

facts that count. Is Jesus who He claimed to be? Did He do what they say He did? Did He teach what He is claimed to have taught? Did He rise from the dead? If Jesus is God and rose from the dead, He rightly demands and deserves our allegiance, and it would be both foolish and rebellious to neglect Him, especially since there is salvation in no one else.

How can these facts be established? By eyewitness testimony! But, not only did John personally witness the events described in this book, he actually wrote these things down. Thus, in John's Gospel (and the others) we have an accurate account of what the companions of Jesus, as led by the Holy Spirit, thought necessary for us to know about Him. We can be confident that Jesus was and is just as they described Him to be. But how can we be sure today? We're in no position to verify the facts of Jesus' life like they did, being 2000 yrs removed from the events described. But, we can be confident in their testimony by the simple fact that many of these witnesses sealed their testimony in their own blood! Would they have given their lives up for a lie? Would they suffer for a farce? No! If ever there were men of integrity, it was these men. If ever a series of events in history have been ruthlessly verified, it's these events.

John also says there were other things that Jesus did and this might lead us to think that the life of Jesus is over but that's not the case at all. In fact, the whole of [ch21](#) is meant to show how Jesus lives in fellowship with His people in the ongoing life of His church. Because He is united with believers, there's a sense in which His life and works still continue in the church as He accomplishes His will through us. Jesus' life, as important and unique as it is, was only a beginning; it lives on in the life, actions, words, and teachings of His redeemed community – the church.

So the Book ends with Peter and John together following Jesus and He leads them right into the Book of Acts. And that's exactly where we will follow them. But remember, if we are following Jesus then our eyes will be on Him and He will be the standard of Christian service. With that as our goal then what we will see about ourselves is that we are at best "unprofitable servants." There is no room for boasting or any arrogant self-sufficiency. We're inadequate, unprofitable. What we need is Jesus . . . in us individually and in one another. 😊