

April 15  
Lesson 7 (NIV)

# FOLLOW

## ME

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Matthew 10:5-15](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [John 21:15-25](#)

### JOHN 21:15-25

<sup>15</sup> When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

<sup>16</sup> Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

<sup>17</sup> The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup> Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” <sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” <sup>23</sup> Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

### KEY VERSE

*“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”—[John 21:15](#)*

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the conversation between the risen Jesus and Peter at the Sea of Galilee.
2. Explain the relationship between loving Jesus and imitating his gracious love and service.
3. Demonstrate the gracious, self-sacrificial love of Jesus in one or more situations in the week ahead.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. The Comeback Kid
- B. Lesson Background: Synonyms
- C. Lesson Background: Shepherds

#### I. Repeated Exchange ([JOHN 21:15-17](#))

- A. First ([v. 15](#))

B. Second (v. 16)

*Called to Sacrifice*

C. Third (v. 17)

## II. Solemn Prophecy (JOHN 21:18, 19)

A. Unwelcome News (v. 18)

B. Warm Invitation (v. 19)

## III. Refocused Challenge (JOHN 21:20-22)

A. Wrong Focus (vv. 20, 21)

B. Right Focus (v. 22)

*The English Chinese Man*

## IV. Witness's Declaration (JOHN 21:23-25)

A. False Rumor (v. 23)

B. True Testimony (vv. 24, 25)

## Conclusion

A. Rising to the Challenge

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. The Comeback Kid

Most football fans will recognize the name Joe Montana. Montana was a star quarterback for the University of Notre Dame during the late 1970s. He then played professional football, spending most of his career with the San Francisco 49ers. He won four Super Bowls with the 49ers and was named Most Valuable Player in three of those games. He became known as the Comeback Kid because of his reputation for leading his team from behind to some dramatic victories. He guided his teams to 31 come-from-behind triumphs during his professional career.

Simon Peter was a broken man following his denial of Jesus; he “wept bitterly” at having done so (Matthew 26:75). We can only imagine how often his thoughts tormented him in the aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion. But the resurrected Jesus offered Peter the opportunity to make a “comeback.” Accepting that opportunity meant leaving remorse and shame behind as he entered a place of renewed service to the Master. Jesus’ words of restoration and his challenge of service to Peter have something to teach us yet today.

### B. Lesson Background: Synonyms

Today’s lesson considers the final 11 verses of John’s Gospel. The immediate background is the 14 verses of John 21:1-14, which was last week’s lesson. A further item of background to consider in relation to this week’s text specifically is a caution in how we interpret the Gospel writer’s use of synonyms and near synonyms.

Noticing that the writer used two Greek words that are translated “love,” two translated “sheep,” two for the care given to sheep, and two for “know,” readers over the years have tried to determine what point John was making by using different words. But there is scant evidence that John intended anything significant by this variety.

For example, when considering the Gospel of John as a whole, we see the different Greek verbs translated “love” used interchangeably in John 3:35; 5:20; 11:5, 36. It is therefore more likely that John used different words stylistically, perhaps to avoid monotonous repetition. We do the same thing by using words like *cat* and *feline* interchangeably. We may also think of *welcoming* and *hospitable*; *automobile* and *car*; *desire* and *want*; etc.

### C. Lesson Background: Shepherds

The image of a shepherd caring for sheep is central to our text. This was an image very close to the experience of biblical people, drawing as it does on a common occupation. The Old Testament uses sheep and shepherd to picture the relationship between God and his people, most notably in Psalm 23. The relationship between God’s people and their leaders, especially the king, was portrayed in similar terms. Israel could be described as sheep with no shepherd (Numbers 27:15-17; 1 Kings 22:17), and wicked leaders of the people were characterized as bad shepherds (Jeremiah 23:1-4; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:1-10).

The picture of sheep without a shepherd is also used of people in Jesus’ day (Matthew 9:36). Jesus described himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11), in contrast to those “thieves and robbers” who had no concern for the welfare of the sheep (10:8-10). Jesus went beyond what an ordinary shepherd would do, even giving his own life for the sake of his sheep (10:11, 17, 18). His exchange with Peter should be understood against this backdrop.

## I. Repeated Exchange

(JOHN 21:15-17)

### A. First (v. 15)

<sup>15a</sup>. **When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”**

The *they* are the seven of John 21:2 plus Jesus (see last week’s lesson). The shared meal eventually gives way to a one-on-one conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus addresses Peter formally, using his given name *Simon* and the name of his father, which functions like a surname does today.

Jesus’ question creates its own question for the reader: What does the word *these* refer to? Does *more than these* mean, “Do you love me more than these nets and boats, than your old life of fishing?” Does it mean, “Do you love me more than you love these other people?” Or does it mean, “Do you love me more than these other people love me?” An answer is impossible to gain from what the text says. We may conclude that Jesus means *these* as a general point of reference: “Do you love me supremely, most of all?”

<sup>15b</sup>. **“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”**

Peter's answer is strongly affirmative, but worded in an interesting way. Before Jesus' death, Peter expressed bold confidence that he was willing to give his own life for Jesus' sake. But Jesus countered that Peter would in fact deny him three times before the rooster crowed ([John 13:37, 38](#)). Jesus knew better than Peter what was in Peter's heart. Now Peter acknowledges Jesus' awareness of his inner life. Peter's statement of love for Jesus is also a confession that he no longer has anything to hide from his Lord.

**15c. Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."**

Jesus then challenges Peter to act on the love that he proclaims. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus has laid down his life for the sheep ([John 10:15](#)). If Peter loves Jesus, he will live in the same way, protecting and providing for God's people as Jesus' under-shepherd. It is most interesting that in Peter's first epistle, he charges elders to serve as nurturing, protecting shepherds under the supreme shepherd, Jesus ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)).

*What Do You Think?*

What diagnostic questions can we ask to ensure lesser loves do not displace love for Jesus?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding finances and possessions

Regarding time and leisure

Regarding passions and priorities

Other

## B. Second (v. 16)

**16. Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"**

**He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."**

**Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."**

With only slight variation, the exchange is repeated: question, answer, challenge. We imagine that Peter is puzzled to be asked a question he has already answered! Once more, however, he expresses his *love* for Jesus; and Jesus responds with a challenge similar to the first: *Take care of my sheep*.

*What Do You Think?*

In what ways can you personally accept the challenge to feed Jesus' sheep?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Identifying aspects of the challenge that applied only to the apostles, if any

Concerning aspects of the challenge that apply only to church leaders, if any

Concerning aspects of the challenge that apply to all Christians

## CALLED TO SACRIFICE

Ann and her family moved to a developing country to live for nine months. While ministering there, they experienced the economic devastation of the culture. Basic necessities were in short supply. She washed clothes by hand, cooked meals without proper ingredients, and endured frequent power outages. When the time to leave came, Ann left happily, ready to be back in her own home.

After their return, however, Ann noticed that part of her husband's heart remained back in their host country. He sensed that God was opening the door for them to return, calling them back to feed God's sheep there. Ann, however, did not want to return to a place of such hardship. Yet her husband's sense of God's calling only grew. Finally, she agreed, and they moved back, remaining for several years.

The apostle Peter was married ([Matthew 8:14](#)). His wife's reaction to his calling to feed God's sheep is not recorded in Scripture. Perhaps her decision was a bit like Ann's. "I realized that I could insist on my way, and my husband would relent," Ann said. "But I'd live knowing that I had kept him from doing what God wanted him to do. Now I'm glad I didn't." Everyone has a sacrifice to make, and each person's sacrifice is different. What's yours?

—L. M. W.

## C. Third (v. 17)

**17a. The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"**

**Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"**

If this were a court of law, Peter's defense attorney might object "Asked and answered! Move on!" For Peter to be *hurt* by this repetition is understandable. Does Jesus doubt his answer? Is Jesus questioning his loyalty? Or is Peter's distress the result of seeing a connection between these three exchanges and his three denials of Jesus ([John 18:15-18, 25-27](#))?

**17b. He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."**

Peter expands on his previous responses by confessing not just that Jesus knows his inner thoughts but that he knows *all things*. Jesus' knowledge is not just exceptional. It is the kind of knowledge that God alone has. John has previously stated that Jesus knew what was inside a person ([John 2:25](#)).

**17c. Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."**

For a third time Jesus repeats the command that flows out of Peter's confession of supreme love. The challenge is unchanged: Peter is to put his love into action as he leads God's people, with Jesus as his example of the good shepherd.

The scope of Jesus' grace is demonstrated by this repeated exchange. Without prior warning or explanation, Jesus has given Peter the opportunity to declare openly three times what he had denied three times during Jesus' trials. But Jesus is not finished with Peter.

*What Do You Think?*

How has an experience of a “second chance” from God shaped you? How should it?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding attitude changes
- Regarding priority adjustments
- Regarding relationships
- Other

## II. Solemn Prophecy

(JOHN 21:18, 19)

### A. Unwelcome News (v. 18)

**<sup>18a.</sup> “Very truly I tell you,**

The expression *very truly* is a favorite of John’s, occurring 26 times in his Gospel but never in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It emphasizes the absolute certainty of what follows. Jesus used the same expression when he warned Peter of his coming denial (John 13:38). Now Jesus uses it to preface a different kind of warning.

**<sup>18b.</sup> “when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”**

Grown, able-bodied people, especially the young, tend to be independent—they usually are willing and able to do things for themselves, things such as dressing themselves. This has characterized Peter’s life to this point.

But in the future, Jesus declares, when Peter is *old*, he will not tie his own garment but will instead be tied up and led against his will. This is an unmistakable prophetic warning that Peter will be arrested and bound, his hands stretched out as a prisoner who will be taken to wherever his captors desire, as Jesus was (John 18:12, 13).

Jesus has told his followers that if the world has hated him, the world will also hate them (John 15:18-21; 16:1-4). That warning is now personalized to Peter. Peter’s life will reflect his Lord’s. But though Jesus’ words are solemn, they are not hopeless.

### B. Warm Invitation (v. 19)

**<sup>19a.</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.**

John removes any doubt about the meaning of Jesus’ words: they predict Peter’s arrest and execution. But this is no mere tragedy. Peter’s *death* will *glorify God*. Jesus has previously spoken of his own death in just this way (John 12:23-28). This means that those who follow him must be prepared to do so at the cost of their lives. It is in giving one’s life that one truly receives life from God (12:25, 26). Peter’s looming imprisonment and death are not a sentence of doom but a call to embrace the greatest purpose for which one can live life: to glorify God.

**<sup>19b.</sup> Then he said to him, “Follow me!”**

As John’s explanation ends, Jesus’ words resume. He ends the prophetic warning with the command *follow me*. Peter was among the first to follow Jesus because of the testimony of John the Baptist and Peter’s brother, Andrew (John 1:35-42). Now Jesus calls him to follow with a new perspective, understanding all the implications.

A very ancient tradition tells us that Peter indeed goes on to die a martyr’s death as a prisoner in Rome. Some expressions of that tradition say that he was crucified, but by Peter’s request he was crucified upside down so that his death would not too closely resemble the Lord’s. It is clear that Peter will indeed do what he had earlier claimed: “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37).

*What Do You Think?*

In what ways does Peter’s reinstatement serve and not serve as a model for reinstatements to Christian service today?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Considering how forgiveness and consequences do and do not interrelate
- Considering uniqueness of the apostles’ roles
- Considering the nature of the offense
- Other

## III. Refocused Challenge

(JOHN 21:20-22)

### A. Wrong Focus (vv. 20, 21)

**<sup>20.</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”)**

Perhaps overwhelmed with the hard words that Jesus has just shared with him, Peter attempts to change the subject. Following behind Peter and Jesus at this moment is *the disciple whom Jesus loved*, traditionally understood as John, the author of this Gospel. The verse further makes reference to the fact that when the disciples were gathered in the upper room before Jesus’ death, Peter had asked John to find out from Jesus the identity of Jesus’ betrayer (John 13:23-26).

**<sup>21.</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”**

Having earlier asked John to pose a question to Jesus about another disciple, Peter now asks Jesus directly about John. If Peter will be arrested and killed, will his friend John as well? If both are followers of Jesus, hated by the world that hated him, will they both suffer the same fate?

Peter's question may be motivated by fear, jealousy, uncertainty, or curiosity. The text does not reveal his state of mind. But it surely expresses faith in Jesus as the one who can supply the answer.

## B. Right Focus (v. 22)

**22. Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."**

Jesus' reply refocuses Peter's thoughts on what Jesus has just charged him to do. What might happen in the future to others is not Peter's concern. It will not change Peter's situation, and it will in no way change the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to abide with his followers through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit ([John 16:33](#)).

Jesus has already spoken to his disciples about departing from the earth and returning someday ([John 14:1-3](#)). The furthest point to which a person's death might be delayed is Jesus' return. That time is unknown to any but God the Father ([Matthew 24:36](#)). So to put the other disciple's future out of Peter's reach, Jesus' rhetorical question has the effect of declaring that even if that disciple lives until Jesus comes, it is not Peter's concern. A Christian's focus is not to be on the future of fellow believers, but their own faithfulness.

Thus Jesus tells Peter a second time to *follow me*. Peter's primary focus is to be on his response to the Lord's leading. To follow Jesus means not pursuing irrelevant matters (compare [1 Timothy 4:7](#); [Titus 3:9](#)) but rather serving as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

### *What Do You Think?*

How do we walk the line between meeting the needs of others (feeding sheep) while not allowing their callings to distract us from ours?

### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- When the feeding involves physical concerns
- When the feeding involves spiritual concerns

## THE ENGLISH CHINESE MAN

In 1853, at the age of 21, Hudson Taylor became a missionary to China. Believing that the other missionaries spent too much time with Europeans and did not relate well with the Chinese people, Taylor began to dress in Chinese clothes and grew a long ponytail in imitation of Chinese men. His fellow missionaries disdained his attempts, but he maintained a good rapport with the Chinese people he loved so much.

At that time, foreigners were permitted to live only in coastal cities. But Taylor believed that all the Chinese needed to know about Jesus, so he began a movement to send missionaries inland, to more remote and dangerous regions. Despite criticism, he continued to recruit people for the work of his mission organization, China Inland Mission (now known as Overseas Missionary Fellowship).

Taylor struggled with depression in feeling the crushing need for missionaries, eventually suffering a physical and mental breakdown. But by then he had recruited hundreds of missionaries. His influence continues, as many believers study his life and become missionaries as well. Does that mean you should too? Not necessarily. The fact that Jesus had different plans for Peter and John is worth noting.

—L. M. W.

## IV. Witness's Declaration

([JOHN 21:23-25](#))

### A. False Rumor (v. 23)

**23. Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"**

Here the direct narration of the story ends, and reflection from John the author begins. There's an old saying among preachers that "anything you say that *can* be misunderstood, *will* be misunderstood." That seems to be the case here. Jesus' words to Peter are remembered and passed along. But somewhere along the line, an interpretation develops that Jesus promised *that this disciple* (John) would remain alive until Jesus returned. John points out that this is a false inference.

How interesting that the rumor that spreads from Jesus' declaration is much like Peter's own question: it reflects a concern to know about another person's future. By reminding readers of Jesus' true intent, John also reminds us of that to which all disciples of Jesus must give full attention: we are to focus on him and his task for us.

### B. True Testimony (vv. 24, 25)

**24. This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.**

Now the reflection widens in scope. The *disciple* of whom Peter inquired is the one who tells the story we have just read. Indeed, he is the source of the entire record in this Gospel. It is *his testimony* of what he has witnessed, in both signs and sayings. The testimony includes many things, including the vital fact that Jesus is the Word become flesh ([John 1:14](#)). Amazing as this is, the *testimony* about it is *true*. John interrupted the narrative once before to make a statement of truthfulness ([19:35](#)). Now he does so again.

**25. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.**

After Thomas's confession of Jesus, John reminds the reader that Jesus performed "many other signs" not recorded in his Gospel ([John 20:30](#)). Now he makes a similar statement, emphasizing the magnitude of what Jesus did. As an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, John realizes that he must be selective in his material; he can't record everything. But what John does provide in his record is sufficient to bring any reader to faith in Jesus. Indeed, that is the stated purpose of this Gospel

(20:31).



Visual for Lesson 7. Point to this visual as you ask, “How is the commission in [John 21:15](#) like and unlike the one in [Matthew 28:19, 20](#)?”

## Conclusion

### A. Rising to the Challenge

Jesus’ words to Peter are both reassuring and unsettling. They reassure us that anyone, even one who denies knowing Jesus, can be restored to fellowship with the Lord by his gracious forgiveness. But they are unsettling because they remind us of the opposition to the gospel. John experienced that opposition personally through his exile on the island of Patmos. There he wrote the book of Revelation, describing himself as “your brother and companion in the suffering” ([Revelation 1:9](#)).

Our response to Jesus’ words to Peter needs to be what Peter’s was: to rise to the challenge to follow Jesus and feed his sheep. Martyrdom may not be in our future. But giving our lives sacrificially in service to Jesus must still be the theme of our lives.

## B. Prayer

Father, we belong to you only by your grace, granted to us by your Son's willing death on our behalf. Empower us, Lord, to follow him and to feed his flock. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## C. Thought to Remember

Feed the flock while following the shepherd.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

## Into the Lesson

Briefly discuss the missions your church supports. Talk about what each does and how your church supports it (financially, through prayer, etc.). Then move to a broader discussion, asking students to talk about what non-political causes they support personally or as a family. (Support doesn't have to be monetary. It could involve volunteer work, donating items, etc.) Have students explain why they support each cause and how they became involved.

Finally, invite students to talk about causes they want to support in the future. These could include existing groups or ideas for new causes students would like to champion. Discuss the reasons that these causes are so important to students and the long-term implications they have.

*Alternative.* Distribute pens and copies of the "Go Fund Whom?" activity, which you can download. Have students work individually to determine which real-life causes they might support. Ask volunteers to explain why they would or would not support each cause.

After either activity say, "Popular causes give people a purpose in life—at least for a while. The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, were enlisted in a cause that gave them eternal purpose."

## Into the Word

Write the following incorrectly copied verses from today's lesson text on the board:

*After they finished preaching, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Do you love me more than your family?" Peter replied, "Lord, you believe that I love you." Jesus shouted, "Feed my lambs."*

*Jesus avoided him again [saying], "Simon, do you obey me?" Peter sang, "Lord, you forget that I obey you." Jesus said, "Take care of my dog."*

*A third time Jesus asked, "Simon, do you follow me?" Peter was annoyed and said, "Lord, you know most things; you know that I follow you." Jesus said to Peter, "Herd my sheep."*

*This is the disciple which read about these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is hard to believe.*

*And this is a complete list of things which Jesus did.*

Slowly read [John 21:15-25](#) together as a class. Have the class make corrections to the miscopied verses on the board as needed.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the "Go Follow Him" activity. Have students work in small groups to unscramble key principles from the text.

After either activity, wrap up by saying, "Peter learned a lot about following Jesus after their breakfast! Jesus restored Peter, who had denied him, by giving him a mission ('feed my sheep') and a direction ('follow me'). John reflected on all this by writing an accurate account of Jesus' ministry, yet certainly not all of it. When we take Jesus' 'follow me' personally, what does that involve?" Allow free discussion.

## Into Life

Begin by reading aloud [Psalm 23](#). As you do so, encourage students to list the different ways that the shepherd in this psalm cares for his sheep. List them on the board.

Read aloud [John 21:15](#). Then say, "Jesus calls Peter and all disciples to show their love for him by taking care of his sheep. But as we do so, it is important that our hearts are in the right place. It is important that we not only know *what* to do as believers, but also that we know *why* we do those things."

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Challenge each student to write two or three sentences on why he or she is a follower of Jesus. Allow one minute to work, then invite volunteers to read their reflections for the group.