



SERMON TITLE: "From Fellowship to Faithfulness"

DATE: May 9, 2021

SCRIPTURE: John 21:15-25

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

SERIES SUMMARY

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

What would it look like to walk into every room you entered and ask, "In here, who is the greatest of these and who is the least of these, and what should I do about it?" What if every space or place we found ourselves, we had a posture of respect, obedience, and honor towards whoever the boss was? And what if every space or place we entered, we had a posture of service, care, and kindness to those most hurting or lonely or sad? Didn't Jesus do this? Even in his own life, he said things like, "I only do what the Father tells me." Even before the cross, he prayed, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." And to the least of these, Jesus talked about leaving the 99 sheep to pursue the one. He had compassion on the fragile and the broken.

Awareness of this spectrum, from the greatest to the least in any given place, should lead to relational obedience. Relational obedience isn't about lifeless submission. It's an active love and faith that is born out of relationship with God. But what do we usually do? We usually walk into a space and our first thought is, "What will give me the most safety and comfort? What will give me the most applause or praise? What will most coddle what I feel and want?" This is not the way of Jesus. Rather, we need to learn this relational dance of submission and service, of respect for the greatest of these and care for the least of these. So, what is the primary shape this kind of obedience should take? How do we know when we're dancing this dance rightly? Or simply, what does faithfulness to relational obedience look like?

In the final scene of John's gospel (21:15-25), Jesus and Peter are walking on the beach after breakfast. Jesus turns to Peter and asks, "Do you love me more than these?" This is a fascinatingly vague question, perhaps intentionally vague because Jesus is an expert question-asker. Think about it: Does he mean, "Peter do you love me more than you love your friends here?" Does he mean, "Peter do you love me more than they love me?" Or, was he nodding at the fishing gear laying around and suggesting, "Peter do you love me more than you love your job?" And the direct implication of this is as simple as it is convicting:

Do you love Jesus more than you love your job? More than you love your husband? More than you love your kids? Do you love Jesus more than you love food? More than you love shopping? More than you love comfort? Do you love Jesus more than you love politics? More than a curated life on social media? More than your friends who only tell you what you want to hear? Do you love him more than control, money, stuff, cars, your house, health, sex, Netflix, ESPN, your iPhone, and your reputation? When people think about you, do they think that you love any single one of these things more than Jesus? This is why Jesus asked, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me *more than these*?"

While these are poignant questions, they are also about relational obedience. Jesus is "the greatest of these" in any and every room you'll ever walk into. He has "all authority in heaven and on earth." The way that you relate to your boss,

your parents, your political leaders - it's all a commentary on the posture of obedience that you should have towards Jesus. And as the greatest of these, as the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords, the Boss of all bosses, the primary way that Jesus wants us to relate to him is love. Not distant fear. Not lifeless submission. Love. And we should love Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It's not that loving football, food, drink, and family is evil and wrong. However, it becomes wrong if it's not a *means to the end* of loving Jesus above it all. That's why Jesus says "more than these." So, when we consider this end of the spectrum of relational obedience...

The way we obey Jesus supremely is by loving him *above* everything and *through* everything.

But what is the primary shape this love should take? "Peter, feed my lambs" (21:15, 16, and 17). This is the opposite end of the relational obedience spectrum. This is the least of these. Jesus' response to Peter's response means that we are supposed to learn to love Jesus by loving serving his people. Jesus wants us to cherish and adore him by kindly attending to his sheep, the church. Or bluntly, if you claim to love Jesus and you don't love the church, then you don't love Jesus. At least, you don't love him the way he's asking Peter to here.

These things are a summons for us to give ourselves to the body of Christ. To be honest, be open, be vulnerable, be in community. We need to have people we can eat with, pray with, laugh with, and cry with. We need people to talk Scripture with, talk sin-struggles with, talk relationships with. We need to study and learn the art of loving Jesus by tending to Jesus' family. And the most fragile part of this reality is tucked in the metaphor...

That is, sheep are not clever animals. They're distracted, and need a leader. They need direction, and protection. Sheep are known to wander off on their and not follow the flock. If they get lost and isolated, they often die alone in the wilderness. Sheep have to stay together. They have to be nourished together. To traverse rough terrain together. They're fragile creatures. This is why Jesus left the 99 for the one. And this is why he's inviting Peter and us, "Feed my sheep." So, while one side of the relational obedience spectrum is about loving God supremely, when we consider the least of these, here is the call:

We serve others supremely by compassionate care for their needs, just like Jesus.

Absolutely this service can include things like deep talks over supper, babysitting, prayer, meal trains, and carpool. But to truly understand someone's deepest needs, and even how they feel about their practical needs, you have to get to know them. It requires relational investment. This compassion requires something out of you. And for Peter, Jesus told him that it would cost him his very life (21:18-19), just like it did for Jesus.

But then, Jesus tells Peter twice to "Follow me." This was Jesus' first call to Peter in chapter 1, and his last call to Peter in chapter 21. And in between these two calls, Jesus is merciful and faithful and forgiving and patient to draw Peter and the other disciples into his self-giving life of love. Even when we experience failure like Peter did, Jesus is gracious and willing to walk with us through any failure, to restore us to intimate fellowship, and empower us to future faithfulness as we follow him. And our archetype for relational obedience is Jesus himself in his going to the cross. He obeyed his Father perfectly ("Not my will, but yours be done"), and he was the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his "least of these" sheep. Therefore, relational obedience climatically looks like following Jesus as he "feeds his sheep" by giving his life for them. Now it's our turn.

Discussion Starters —

- What stood out to you the most from this passage/message?
- Do you want to love Jesus above everything else? Do you?
- Do you want to love everything else as a means to love Jesus more? Do you?
- How should you specifically and practically love Jesus by loving his people?
- Who do you know who lives out these things well?
- What are the primary excuses that you make when it comes to loving Jesus supremely?
- What are the primary excuses that you make when it comes to serving Jesus' people?
- What in your life does Jesus want you to change so that you can more faithfully follow him?