

Relationship

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John 17²⁰⁻²⁴ / Is 55¹⁻⁹

One enduring fact about human existence imposes itself on our race time and time again. Despite our drive towards independence and self sufficiency, despite our propensity for hate and self destruction and despite our inability to love and value others as we should the fact remains that **we need each other**. A rather crude and cruel experiment was carried out by Emperor Frederick, who ruled the Roman Empire in the thirteenth century. He developed a theory that there must be an original language which all people were born with and he wanted to know what that was. He decided it could only be one of three: Hebrew, Greek, or Latin? To test this out they isolated a few infants from the sound of the human voice. He reasoned that they would eventually speak the natural tongue of man. Wet nurses who were sworn to absolute silence were obtained, and though it was difficult for them, they abided by the rule. The infants never heard a word -- not a sound from a human voice. Within several months they were all dead.

Jesus calls us into **relationship**. He seeks from God the blessing of the relationship He has with the Father and He seeks it for you and I. We are blessed when we come into and stay in **relationship with God**. Bob Jones made money out of books on property and in one of those books he enumerated the three priorities of property investment. Can anyone tell me what they were? Yes! Location, location and... location! Let me enumerate the three priorities of Christian life, of the life of faith. Relationship, relationship, relationship! Many things appear to take precedence over relationship when it comes to faith. Being happy is one common priority today. Many today choose so called happiness over relationship and, to be fair, where there is abuse going on there may well be good reason to put good boundaries around a relationship. But we've gone way beyond this today. Today we are simply unprepared to sacrifice even short term happiness for the sake of making a relationship work. It seems as soon as things get rocky the first thing we look to do is to get out. Being rich is another deal breaker when it comes to relationships. How many sacrifice good relationship dynamics for a 60 hour week and an ulcer? Safety I suspect is another relationship killer. Every relationship carries with it some risk. We risk ourselves in relationship because we risk not only rejection but also correction and we risk having our will and comfort challenged in many other ways. A 'risk-free' relationship is what psychologists call dysfunctional because it operates not out of **who the people are** but out of a set of spoken or unspoken rules which bind the parties to particular well defined 'safe'

behaviours. So for the sake of 'so called' happiness we turn relationships into behavioural prisons designed to shield us from reality. And this leaves us time and again with an enormous gaping emptiness inside. It leaves us short on both experience and confidence and, in the end, short on simple relational skills.

Jesus says to us this morning – I want you in a relationship with me and my Father. I want to teach you what relationship means and I want you to learn to relate well, to Me and to others. There is, however, one thing that stands in the way of most relationships and that is... ourselves!

Can we get past ourselves?

Of course the key relationship for Christians is that we have with God. God seeks a restored relationship with us. Restored because sin has separated us from God. Jesus came, lived and died so that we might live again in relationship with God. The Bible, however, assures us that just as we need to be restored to God we also need to be restored to one another, indeed, **the fruit** of our restoration to God is restored relationships with others. So what can we learn from the scriptures about relationship? Let's remind ourselves of three stages or dimensions of relationship which can be drawn out from Jesus' relationship with His disciples. We'll call these, Coming, Walking and Obeying for want of better titles.

Jesus says to all people, ²⁸**"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** (Matt 11)

A primary requirement of relationship with Jesus is to come to Him – to approach Him. Jesus calls us to leave behind our isolation and make a deliberate move towards Him. We must all do this in the beginning. We must all leave behind our agendas and our own pathways and move towards Jesus for this is the principle device by which we take advantage of what He offers. We cannot browse with Jesus, we cannot window shop. It's come and buy or not. It's walk to me or know nothing about me. Looking at Jesus from afar leaves us in the world we struggle with.

And the something similar can be said of relationships with one another. The very definition of relationship implies an intermingling, a connectedness and the sooner this is entered into the quicker will a relationship develop. Perhaps one of the most persistent lies we tell ourselves is that we will be safe if we hang back, if we fail to launch! And certainly there are skills to learn in all relating. One such skill is to come to a relationship free of assumptions – to try to be open to who the other person is without making too many assumptions. This is often where our own self-centredness can sabotage our attempts to relate. A slight hesitation, a confusing comment, a failure to smile or even a misunderstanding of what we've said and so often our reaction is to jump to the conclusion that we are being rejected, that we have failed, that something is wrong **with us!** We must learn to get past ourselves in relating. The key to coming is to take the opportunities God gives us – to rejoice in the company of others – to see them as gifts and not

as nuisances. Often the only difference between a lonely person and one who has many friends is that they've taken their opportunities.

The story is told of a young man who wished to marry the farmer's beautiful daughter. He went to the farmer to ask his permission. The farmer looked him over and responded, "Son, go stand out in that field and I'm going to release three bulls, one at a time. If you can catch the tail of any one of the three bulls, you can marry my daughter." The young man stood in the pasture awaiting the first bull. The barn door opened and out ran the biggest, meanest-looking bull he had ever seen. He decided that one of the next bulls had to be a better choice than this one, so he ran over to the side and let the bull pass through the pasture out the back gate. The barn door opened again. Unbelievable. He had never seen anything so big and fierce in his life. It stood - pawing the ground, grunting, slinging slobber - as it eyed him. Whatever the next bull was like, it had to be a better choice than this one. He ran to the fence and let the bull pass through the pasture, out the back gate. The door opened a third time. A smile came across his face. This was the weakest, scrawniest little bull he had ever seen. This one was his bull. As the bull came running by, he positioned himself just right and jumped at just the exact moment. He grabbed... but the bull had no tail! Life is full of opportunities. Some will be easy to take advantage of, some will be difficult. But once we let them pass (often in hopes of something better), those opportunities may never again be available.

Jesus called His disciples to walk with Him. **¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for men.”** (Matt 4)

Once a relationship has begun it does not grow in a vacuum. Jesus' invitation to His disciples implies more than walking with Him. It implies living with Him. Going with Him where he goes, sleeping where He sleeps, working with Him. This second stage requires a significantly greater commitment. We have come to Jesus and He has welcomed us into His arms. We know we have a right to be with Him and we have accepted the love He offers. Many stop here, content, as it were, with the **right** rather than the **fullness** of relationship. This is often where marriages end up. Stuck with the name only; missing the fullness. In order for fullness to come a much greater commitment is required – that of walking with the person, identifying with them, and becoming someone who sees as they do, even if we choose to disagree. What a difference this makes. I've told this story many times before but it's worth telling again because it illustrates the effectiveness of this principle beautifully.

A woman seeking counsel from Dr. George W. Crane, the psychologist, confided that she hated her husband, and intended to divorce him. "I want to hurt him all I can," she declared firmly. "Well, in that case," said Dr. Crane, "I advise you to start showering him with compliments. When you have become indispensable to him, when he thinks you love him devotedly, then start the divorce action. That is the way to hurt him." Some months later the wife returned to report that all was going well. She had followed the suggested course. "Good," said Dr. Crane.

“Now’s the time to file for divorce.” “Divorce!” the woman said indignantly. “Never! I love my husband dearly!”

When we **invest** in Jesus we begin to really grow as Christian. Some of us began with an initial investment many years ago. We invested what we could then. We gave our lives to him. But with most investments continued deposits are required to keep things growing. **When will we make another investment with Him?** When we **invest** in the wellbeing of another we truly begin to relate to them.

So we come to Jesus, we walk with Jesus and finally we obey Jesus. Of course if we’ve come and have walked we already have obeyed. However I believe the word obedience in the Bible carries with some nuances which are far more subtle than perhaps the metaphor of military obedience where obedience is simply unquestioning compliance. Jesus says this in John 10...

²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. (John 10)

The sheep obey the shepherd but why do they obey? They obey not out of a sense of duty or fear but because they **recognise the voice of the shepherd**. I think for too long we’ve characterised our problem with obedience in terms largely of rebellion. And this can certainly be the case but there are other reasons for not obeying and one of them is what might be called unfamiliarity. Trust is usually built up through familiarity and it seems that the true sheep **are familiar** with the voice of their master and this is what separates His sheep from other sheep. Jesus says ‘**My sheep** hear my voice...’ So a significant aspect of our relating to Christ is this growing accustomed to His voice. But how do we do this? How do we become accustomed to the voice of Christ?

Early in the piece Jesus says of the sheep this...

⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. (John 10)

It is clear that the sheep have a history of walking with Jesus and this history is what lies behind the familiarity. As we walk with Him we become familiar with His voice and we begin to recognise that voice even at times when the wolf attacks or perhaps, especially at times when the wolf attacks. So Jesus is saying to us, walk with me in your regular lives, let me guide you there so that when the wolf attacks you will be able to quickly recognise what I am saying to you and react.

The biggest impediment to doing this, however, is how much space we have in our everyday life. If we have no space, if we’re totally consumed with our ‘activity’ we will miss the voice of Jesus. As a very wise woman by the name of Mabel Newcomer once said ‘It is more important to know where you are going than to get there quickly. Do not mistake activity for achievement.’ - Let me illustrate with this last story...

A philosophy professor stood before his class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly he picked up a large empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with rocks, rocks about 2" in diameter. He then asked the students if the jar was full? They agreed that it was.

So the professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles, of course, rolled into the open areas between the rocks. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was. The students laughed. The professor picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. "Now," said the professor, "I want you to recognise that this is your life. The rocks are the important things – God, your family, your partner, your health, your children - things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, your car. The sand is everything else. The small stuff." If you put the sand into the jar first, there is no room for the pebbles or the rocks. The same goes for your life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are really important to you.

Pay attention to the things that are critical to your well being. God's Word. Play with your children. Take time to get medical checkups. Take your partner out dancing. Work will always be there, so will the messy house, the broken downpipe and the lawns. "Take care of the rocks first - the things that really matter. **Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.**"