

Following Christ - John

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[0 : 00] I'd like if you would turn back with me to Luke's Gospel chapter 9. It's going to be a little bit like this morning. We're going to maybe do one or two jumps through Scripture at various points.

But mainly we'll be looking at the character of John this morning. As I said earlier, we looked at Jesus in our last sermon on grace.

We looked at Jesus, the great example of grace in our lives. And we looked at it through the eyes of John, who wrote the Gospel of John. And John himself then becomes known as the Apostle of Love, the Apostle of Grace himself.

And we know him as the one who was very close to Jesus. I'll go on to mention that. But what I wanted to say by way of introduction was that it wasn't always like that.

John wasn't always the Apostle of Love. And his grace and his love develops in his Christian life.

[1 : 11] I want to look at that a little bit this evening. He was someone who came very close to Jesus Christ in his life.

John's character, not that much is known to us, I guess, other than through his writings and one or two of the Gospel accounts. He had a father whose name was Zebedee.

And they were fishermen. And he had a brother called James. And together James and John were called Boanargy's sons of thunder.

That's what they were known as. And I guess that was in relation to their characters. They weren't gentle and mild characters, but they were strong and petuous, powerful individuals who had strong views and who had strong characters.

He became part of Jesus' inner circle. Peter, James and John being the closest friends of Jesus Christ. And undoubtedly he had leadership qualities that were very raw in the beginning, but that Christ nurtured through his public years of ministry and friendship with John.

[2 : 34] Jesus took John when he healed Jairus' daughter. He took John when he appeared on the mountain and was transfigured.

He took John to Gethsemane to hear him pray, and he took John to the cross to watch him die. John was very close to Jesus, and we'll see that as we move on in our study for a few moments together.

But just by way of introduction to that, I think we're reminded from that experience or that relationship between Jesus and John, the importance of close friendship.

Close friendship was important to the Son of God. It was important to the Lord Jesus Christ. It was as necessary for Jesus as it was for John and for the disciples.

It was absolutely natural for Jesus to have close friends. It was something to be encouraged. This wasn't cliques, this wasn't exclusivism, but it was what bound them together in the love and grace that they shared with one another, and they had that friendship together in their lives.

[3 : 50] And what binds the Christian church together is at a human level, also with the spirit in their lives, is deep seated Christ-centered friendships. These are tremendously significant and important in the Christian church.

And it's important that you develop and that you know and that you have and that you encourage in your life deep seated spiritual Christian friendships.

That's what Jesus enjoyed with the disciples. It's what he enjoyed with the three specific disciples that were part, as it were, of that inner group of friends that he had. We can't all know everyone all the same.

We can't have the same level of friendship and intimacy with all the believers in our lives and with all the believers that we come across. We're not naturally affiliated in the same way with all believers.

We love all believers, we respect and share with all believers, and we are part of the family of God. But it's a good thing to develop strong Christian spiritual friendships.

[4 : 57] Can I encourage that particularly among the young people? By the time you're ancient like I am, then you've probably had in your life and fused in your life close Christian friends that are significant and important and vital to you.

But can I encourage you as young Christians to recognise the significance and the importance of developing accountable, deep, meaningful Christian friendships, people that you can pray with, people that you can share your faith with, people that are important to you and that you can share grace with?

The fewer ties that you have in the Christian community, the fewer close spiritual friendships you have, the harder it is to develop and grow as a Christian, the easier it is to drift from Christian friendship and fellowship.

And it is to be encouraged and something that Christ encouraged by his own actions and by his own relationships, by his own friendships.

And we see too with Jesus and John, Jesus' own leadership style, not just with John but the other disciples, he took these young guys and he disciplined them. He spent time with them. He was close to them.

[6 : 17] He respected them and he loved them and he engaged energy and he engaged time in their company. And as a church we should recognise that.

As leaders we should recognise that. And as people we should recognise the importance of nurturing and mentoring and developing and caring for and spending time with our young people so that they grow in their Christian faith.

And that you will make allowances for our young people, as older people that we would, and that also you would nurture and mature and help our young leadership team that we have some of whom you saw this evening up the front praying.

That there is this sense of energetic and enthusiastic time spent with one another as we recognise and see the pattern of Jesus in leadership.

And throughout that whole gospel revelation of the relationship between John and Jesus we see the centrality of love.

[7 : 29] John was the apostle or became the apostle of love and sometimes we think of him as a kind of sappy soft person because of that for whatever reason. But he wasn't at all. He was a son of thunder.

He was a strong and manly Christian person who was growing to maturity and was full of grace.

Grace is not meekness in the sense that we understand that word, it's not weakness. But it is strength and courage and self-discipline and self-denial.

And we see that very much in John's life. But it's good also to see the development in John's life. He wasn't, as I've said, he wasn't always the apostle of love.

It has to be said, fairly late on in Jesus' ministry, not long before Jesus went to Jerusalem to the cross. And we have a fairly astonishing account of the way John thought of other people and the lack of maturity that he had in his Christian life.

[8 : 45] He was proud in his youthfulness and he was rather unattractive, the truth be told, in his thinking and in his living.

He was very exclusivist in his own thinking. Master, he says in verse 49, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he is not one of us.

Very exclusivist in his thinking. Very judgmental in his thinking as they were heading for Jerusalem. The disciples, James and John saw this, that is the Samaritan town, wouldn't receive Jesus.

They asked, Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them? Jesus turned and rebuked them and they went to another village. And we also know that he was vying for position even within the discipleship.

They were arguing in verse 46 about which of them was the greatest. And what's more, it was encouraged by his mother in Matthew chapter 20 and verse 20. James and John's mother came to Jesus and said, will you let my two sons sit on your right hand and on your left when you come into your kingdom?

[10 : 10] And there was this pride that was welling up within him about position and knowledge. I had a great quote from A.B. Bruce's book on leadership to have disciples, but I've left it in my study.

So you'll get another time. But we see and we recognize that there was much in John's life that he needed to learn at this early stage.

And we see here Luke dealing with his attitude, his pride within himself. He was proud and he wanted this great position among the discipleship.

And Jesus responds to him by saying, you know, the greatest is the least among you. He who is a servant is greater than the master. So not only has he got a wrong attitude within himself, but then he's also got a wrong attitude to others who are believers, but who are not of his particular ilk, shall we say, he wants them to be stopped from what they're doing.

Jesus again rebukes him very interestingly and very powerfully. Jesus says, listen, whoever is not against you is for you. I wonder how often or I wonder how little that's our attitude when we come across those who don't think or act in the same way as us as Christians, but who are serving Jesus in Jesus' name.

[11 : 41] And then we find the third little montage we have here is an attitude to the world, to those who aren't Christians. They simply want God to destroy them because they haven't accepted Jesus, the Samaritan village that doesn't accept Jesus.

James and John feel duty-bound to call down God's judgment on them. They feel they have the right to do that and they feel that's what Jesus would want.

Jesus, of course, rebukes them for that and they went elsewhere. So we see that there was much work in John's life to be done.

He's not yet the apostle of love that we come to know and come to recognize in his gospel and in his letters and in the book of Revelation.

But it's a maturing love and it's a love that is maturing because he's spending time with Jesus and because he's learning eventually from Jesus, takes a long time, doesn't it?

[12 : 43] Do you think you only need to hear one truth once? And that is just learned it. Have we grown in grace when we have heard the truth of God's grace once being preached to us?

Someone was speaking to me today and saying we should really carry on on the series of grace for another year, because it takes a long time for us to understand and to grasp these concepts of grace.

I think it probably takes a lifetime, if the honest truth be told. But nonetheless, we're slow to learn and yet John did see and did understand and did begin to appreciate the character and the teaching of Jesus.

And at the cross he hears these words, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. He thinks back to Jesus' attitude to the Samaritan woman and he understands and he knows and he begins to learn from Jesus and from his teaching through the Holy Spirit.

Then the resurrection itself opens his eyes to the power and boldness and glory of the gospel message and of the gospel truth through Jesus Christ.

[13 : 53] So that he becomes a great preacher of the gospel and he goes out with boldness so that in Acts 4 verse 13 the people look at him and say, this is an ordinary unschooled person and yet they took note of his courage and they took note that he had been with Jesus and he goes on to become a great leader, a great apostle in the Christian church who gives us the beautiful epistles of John and also in his old age.

With all his life behind him, when he's patiently enduring and he may be feel that his work is done, he's exiled as a prisoner in Patmos, useless.

And yet in the Lord's day he's in the Spirit and he's given this wonderful, glorious vision and revelation that becomes such an encouragement to a persecuted church and such an amazing declaration of God's sovereignty and of God's purposes and plans for the church.

So we see a developing individual, a growing Christian, someone who's learning slowly but nonetheless learning, someone who Christ is patient with and who disciples and who loves.

We see both an example there of the way Christ deals with us in His grace and how we are to deal with one another, we are reminded of the importance of growing down.

[15 : 22] Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me for, he who is least among you, he is the greatest.

Isn't that always the lesson that Jesus is teaching us? The importance of growing down, down towards humility, not humiliation, humility that we're not proud in our Christian lives and that we're not arrogant in our Christian thinking, but that we are like children trusting, little children trusting.

Yes, questioning, children, little children question, but they believe and they believe the answers that they're given and they trust and they rely on those who are bigger and those who love them as grown-ups, their parents particularly.

And we are to have that humility of having a simple trust, growing down away from independence and growing down into a dependent relationship with this grace-filled God that we were looking at this morning and remembering to respond to His grace in our lives, and that we were willing to learn, recognising there's so much we don't know, recognising really before God and that came across very much this afternoon in people's prayers.

We spent some time praying just in worship to God, not asking Him for anything, not asking Him, not interceding before Him, but just worshipping Him when it came across. We worshipped Him how little we know, how small we are before this great and sovereign God, and how glorious He is that we grow down into that place of humble trust, not necessarily needing to know all the answers all the time, but also at the same time growing up and maturing if it's not a paradoxical or contradictory to speak in these terms, growing down in dependence towards God, but also growing up in maturity, that we are learning and being disciples and that we are growing up in our Christian faith, and we are able to do so.

[17 : 41] It's one of the great thrills, I would say, of being a minister in this particular congregation, in a leader in this congregation, to see people, young people particularly, young in age, be young in faith, growing and maturing.

And my great prayer, or my great request of prayer from you is that you would pray for the leadership that we would have the wisdom to know when to give our young Christian friends freedom, and when to allow them to make their mistakes, and when to encourage them to grow, and how to lead them.

It's such a tremendously important and significant thing. It's such an important time of your lives. It's great to see young Christians engaging their lives and their energies and their intellect and their thinking and growing up in their faiths, not just remaining as babes in Christ, but growing in maturity and growing in love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we encourage that as we see it in the life of John, and also encourage us, as we are getting older, that God will use us even when the world casts us aside and throws us onto an island like Patmos to live out our lives in uselessness, apparently.

Yet we can be greatly used of God, even though we may not have our youthful energy and vigor in a way that we once had, that God uses all who are willing to be used, that we just have a willing spirit.

[19 : 34] And again, can I just say again how significant it's been to be in a congregation where even the elderly are young at heart, and where they have been willing to continue serving and being blessed and being a blessing in their older age and in their older stages of their lives.

And it's such a blessing. And someone prayed for me today downstairs that we would learn as we go on in our Christian lives not to finish badly such a great prayer, that we wouldn't finish badly, but that we would grow up and grow on to maturity and continue to be used, even when others may think that our lives are of little value.

So we see a character who is brash and exclusivist and judgmental and who is a bit proud.

And probably we can see ourselves in that character very much. It's very easy for us to be exclusivist if they're not belonging to my family or my group.

I'm not going to let them play, that we want everyone to be like us. We mentioned that this morning. Jesus' great words, whoever is not against you is for you. Remember that.

[21 : 04] Grow up with that attitude in Christ, among the Christian community, among the wider Christian community, with all the different denominations and all the different churches.

Christ is held high. If Christ is honored, remember that. Remember that those who are not against us are for us. And remember not to be proud and not to be judgmental.

Leave the work of judgment to God. And if people will not hear the message, people will not have or understand our faith, then sometimes all we can do is move on.

But we certainly don't ask for the judgment of God to be brought down on those who have in our eyes rejected, but who may yet come to a faith in Jesus Christ.

And so we are reminded of the character of John, so brash, so exclusivist, so judgmental. Yet he goes on to do so many great things for the Lord God in his life.

[22 : 07] His own gospel. It's a great gospel. It's a unique gospel, the gospel of John. And in verse 30 of chapter 20, it says, these things were written.

The gospel is written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. That's why he wrote his gospel so that people would believe.

There's over fifty-four references to believing in the gospel of John. That's what he wanted to do. He had come to know this great Savior, this Savior who was patient with Him, who taught Him, who He was close to, who He loved, who He had this great relationship with, and who He learned from so much.

And He knew Him as Lord and God, and He wanted people to believe in Him, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the great cry of the Christian church.

It's the great cry that we put out, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And He also said so many valuable things to the Christian church as well, didn't He? Other than the revelation He was given.

[23 : 15] But His beautiful epistles of John are so full of love. He's so matured, and He has so been touched by life's events, and by what He's seen and what He's known.

But He has come to be a great apostle of grace, a great apostle of love. And yet He wants those who believe in Christ to walk in the light, to live in the light.

That's His great advice if we're thinking of some of the major teachings of John. One is that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. One is that you live in the light. One John 1 verse 7, you know, but if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus.

His Son purifies us from all sin. We need to be those who walk in the light. He recognized the importance of that. Walking in the shadow of the light of Jesus Christ and all that that means and all that is involved in that.

As a people, as a church, we recognize the importance of living in the light of the person of Jesus Christ. May we do that and learn from the apostle John.

[24 : 26] And he also encourages throughout these three letters to love like a family. He speaks often of the Father in these epistles.

He also speaks of the Christian church very often as his children or the family of God together. And he wants the family of God to live, the people of God to live as a family to deal with one another honestly and openly to be committed to one another.

He speaks often of the one another's that we are to share with each other in Christ. That we are to embrace all levels and ages and stages of the family.

I hope that we're able to do that. I hope we learn from the young people and the energy and the vision and the excitement of so much of their lives.

I hope that we respect and care for those who are older. I pray and hope that we look after one another in our city groups and that we live as family and that we embrace Christ and that we develop spiritual and deep friendships.

[25 : 41] Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Live in the light of love like a family. There are many teachings from John this apostle who was touched by the grace of Jesus and who grew and matured Christian faith.

May we display the same kind of patience and grace and care and concern for one another in the makeup of this congregation and may we reflect grace as we do so.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us, that you would teach us, that you would lead us and guide us. We pray that we would be aware of the nature of Jesus' leadership in our lives, that we would recognize that you are not a harsh master, that you gently lead us and guide us and that we recognize also that we sometimes are led into experiences that we simply have no idea of how to deal with, that we recoil from and that we struggle in.

And Lord, in the darkness of these events, we pray that you would give us a trust, that simple trust in the Lord God and in His promises to take us through these times, that we would wait on the Lord and in so doing that we would find His redemption and His reasoning through these events in our lives.

Lord, bless as we pray. We thank you for all the young people that are in the congregation, those who are new in the faith, those who are still not in the faith and we long and pray for them that they might commit to the Lord Jesus, that they would find strong lifelong Christian friendships because we know there's little doubt that the friends we make now will be influential for us in the rest of our lives.

[27 : 54] And we ask that they would be good and positive and spiritual and accountable relationships. And we pray that we would also learn from one another that we would be a family together, that we would know and benefit from older, more mature Christians and older, more mature Christians would benefit from those who are younger.

So hear us. We pray for grace to be among us. We pray that we would learn from the life of John and remind ourselves that not to be discouraged, that we are not yet mature in the faith very often, but we have much to learn and that we would simply be those who would sit at the feet of Jesus and be willing to learn from Him and trust in Him.

So bless and help us and guide us. Be with the young people and the not-so-young people that will be meeting later on and watch over them. We pray and guide us and keep us. We thank you for those who visit with us today, this morning and this evening. May God's blessing be richly on them.

We thank you for the encouragement that their company and their presence among us is. And we rejoice with them and ask that you would bless their own lives and their home congregations or home gospel communities and that they would know God's blessing in these places.

Hear our prayers, Lord, we ask and pardon our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.