

John 7:1-24 “Struggles with Following Jesus”

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Preacher: Will Spink

- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Boy, we have a lot of good reasons to look at God's Word together this morning. Hope in the face of Christ. We're returning this morning to our study of John's Gospel, where we're seeking to do just that, to encounter the real Jesus, to know who He is and what He's about.
- John wants us, remember, to understand who Jesus really is because He wants for us to believe. He wants for our friends and our neighbors to believe.
- He wants for us to find life in Jesus. This issue of who Jesus is is central to John's whole account, especially to the part we're in right now.
- Everyone is asking that question. Everyone's talking about Jesus. After all, they have watched Him heal all sorts of people. He has just miraculously fed 5,000 plus, and then He spoke to them about Himself.
- [1 : 15] He said, I am the bread of life. Jesus offering, fulfilling, eternal life just by believing in Him.
- But so many don't believe. Most right now are leaving Him. John told us this would happen. And remember chapter 1, He came to His own people, but His own did not receive Him.
- Our passage today highlights unbelief. Not merely unbelief like, I reject everything Jesus claims and don't want anything to do with Him, but the kind of unbelief struggles that all of us, church people who hang around Jesus, us too, have with following Jesus.
- He's a Jesus who calls us to find life in Him. Therefore, all of life in Him. That's where He calls us to follow Him, is in everything living with Him and for Him.
- So we need to pray for our hearts this morning as we hear God's Word. And then we'll read this next section in three different pieces as we go. Let's pray together. Father, I pray for our hearts this morning.
- [2 : 42] For our busy hearts. Our hurting hearts. Our tired hearts. Our distracted hearts. Our selfish hearts. We need you.
- We need you to work there. We need you to soften and transform and comfort and enliven and inspire our hearts with the love of Jesus.
- We ask that you would in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I love you. But not that much.
- Imagine you grew up loving peanut butter. You wanted to eat everything peanut butter you possibly could. You started growing peanuts. You research all day the best peanut butter products imaginable.
- And then you find out that the girl you've started dating is severely allergic to peanuts. She spends her whole life protecting herself from peanut products.
- [3 : 46] No eating. No kissing. No touching. I love you. But not that much is going to be said at some point to her.

Or if you can imagine it, maybe to peanut butter. Imagine you meet a guy in school and you become best friends. And you just want to do everything together. You want to hang out on the weekends.

You're going to start a business together and do all of life. But he keeps talking smack about your mama. I love you, man, but not that much.

Something's got to give. Or the ultimate struggle. Imagine you grow up obsessed with Alabama football. From birth, your parents named you so your initials would be RTR.

And you have now become a cheerleader for Alabama who happens to have fallen in love with the Auburn quarterback. Who spends his whole life working against what you love most.

[4 : 55] I don't know when that struggle will reach a breaking point. Could be the orange and blue pom-poms he gives you for your birthday. Could be when he asks you to say War Eagle. Maybe it's the day of the Iron Bowl the first time.

But at some point, either he or Alabama will hear, I love you, but not that much. Those are mostly silly examples.

Although if I hit a little too close to home in your marriage, I'm really sorry. Wasn't aiming for anybody. But the point is serious. We can't live for someone whose life works against what we love most.

There are more serious things than those I've just said that we love deep in our hearts. And as people in this passage encounter Jesus, they're going to show their struggle with following him.

John, who's always focused on belief and unbelief, helps us realize that our struggles with following Jesus are at their root heart issues.

[6 : 07] Sometimes we like to tell ourselves, they're just in my head, it's just an intellectual conundrum that I can't get around. There's just something I can't argue myself out of. It's a heart issue.

We can't live for someone whose life works against what we love most. Listen for that as we read John 7.

This is now several months after the feeding of the 5,000 and most of Jesus' followers leaving him. Jesus has stayed close to home for a while in Galilee. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us all he's been doing and teaching.

But he hasn't been back to Jerusalem, which is beginning to frustrate his brothers. Verse 1. After this, Jesus went about in Galilee.

He would not go about in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill him. Now the Jews' feast of booths was at hand. So his brothers said to him, leave here and go to Judea that your disciples also may see the works you are doing.

[7 : 11] For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world. For not even his brothers believed in him.

Jesus said to them, my time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.

You go up to the feast. I'm not going up to this feast for my time has not yet fully come. After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Put yourself in James' sandals for a moment. One of Jesus' brothers that we know was later a leader in the early church. You are a strong, strategic go-getter by personality.

You're sensitive to the honor of the family name being so vital in Jewish culture. The best way to get ahead, to have your family be influential and honorable, that's where it's at and you know it.

- [8 : 20] And here you find yourself with an opportunity. This eccentric older brother of yours is doing some really amazing, cool stuff.
- There's an opportunity to capitalize on, but he's got no sense of getting ahead, of building a movement.
- Almost no one is with him anymore and he's spending all his time in these small towns. Religious credibility comes from Jerusalem. The crowds gathered there, the leaders of the temple.
- I've got some advice for you, Jesus. Go to Jerusalem. Do some events there. You know, showcase, show off your glory a bit.
- You'll build a following. It'll be great for my, I mean, your car. Can you relate to feelings like that? I can.
- [9 : 21] I'm battling these feelings right now because I'm preaching at Presbytery Tuesday to a bunch of preachers. More than ever, I want the people listening to me to think well of what I say.
- I'm wrestling with thoughts of, maybe if I say this, it'll make this guy praise me afterwards. Maybe this will impress him. And what I really want is to point them to Jesus, what we all need.
- But there's a lot else that my heart loves and wants to happen then. That longing for worldly success makes for quite a struggle in following Jesus wholeheartedly.
- In your heart, it may feel like pride. In your own reputation, your status, wanting fame, respect among your peers.
- It might feel like envy of what others have. Greed for more power, more influence, more money. Loving the praise of men.
- [10 : 42] Does it feel so good to hear the wonderful things they'll say? But if those feelings are left unchecked to flourish in your heart, they'll keep you from being all in with Jesus, following Jesus where he calls you to go.
- You can be like his brothers who see the cool things he does and they don't mind hanging around him when it makes you look good, but if you're in it for the worldly success, you don't believe in Jesus.
- That may sound harsh. I mean, maybe you think, like I did, that verse 5 should read, for his brothers believed in him. I mean, didn't they want people to see his miracles?
- They've seen the stuff. They think he can do more cool stuff. They believed in him, right? No. No, they didn't. Lots of people have seen his miracles but not seen who Jesus was.
- Their hearts are for themselves, not Jesus. For the praise of man, not the praise of God. That's why Jesus says to them, the world cannot hate you because you share its values, its definition of success, the world's pathway to get there.
- [12 : 03] So Jesus' brothers are clearly not following him. They go on without him, don't they? John Piper was really helpful to me in this place pointing out it's not a head problem for them.
- They've seen the great works, they know we can do them, but there's a heart problem going on, isn't there? They love worldly success more than the pathway of Jesus.
- Piper says, our natural love for human glory makes it impossible to know and follow a person whose whole life is bent on emptying himself to glorify his father and save sinners.
- It is impossible to know him for who he really is when his whole coming, living, dying, contradicts your deepest love, namely, the love of human praise.
- Jesus seems intent on downward mobility when you're longing to move up in the world. You want a bigger reputation, a bigger house, a bigger bank account, and Jesus' life and words keep working against that.

[13 : 17] He's humble. No place to lay his head. Share your money with those who have less. Jesus. Maybe if you're James, you'd say, I love you, Jesus, but not that much.

And his brothers are off to make a name for themselves in Jerusalem lest they get stuck in Galilee when they grow up. One of the things I really love at this point in this story is that Jesus is intent on waiting for the direction of his father even when it makes no sense from a human perspective.

Humanly speaking, this is the time to act. Jesus is waiting on his father's timing even though his popularity is dwindling. His mission seems to be faltering.

His poll numbers are down. The next section shows why it was not yet time for Jesus to join the crowds of pilgrims who surely would have been alongside his brothers at the beginning of this very popular week-long feast in Jerusalem.

It wasn't yet time for the culmination of Jesus' life. Entering Jerusalem there among the crowds almost certainly would have led to what it did a few months later, the triumphal entry at the Passover feast.

[14 : 46] Jesus waited on his father's timing and when things had calmed a bit after the big kickoff, verse 10, but after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up not publicly but in private.

Right? Hear the difference? The Jews were looking for him at the feast and saying, where is he? And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said he's a good man, others said, no, he's leading the people astray.

Yet for fear of the Jews, no one spoke openly of him. The whole city is abuzz about Jesus.

Even before he shows up, it's whether he's there or not. It's a testament to Jesus' power and his impact that no one ignores him. Religious leaders, the Jews, the crowds of people, they're all whispering about him.

I can't believe I'm saying this right now but it reminds me of the current buzz about Taylor Swift. Will she come to the Super Bowl to cheer on her boyfriend? Y'all, there's more buzz, there are more articles about whether she will be present next week or not than any of the players on the field.

[16 : 03] Everyone's talking about it. Is Jesus coming to the feast? Where is he? Everyone has an opinion about Jesus. Good or bad.

They've all seen or at least heard what he does and what he says. You can't ignore him. Imagine you're a young woman named Mary. You're walking the crowded streets of Jerusalem that day with your friends and you ask, hey, have you seen Jesus here yet?

I want to see a miracle. And your friend says, I just want to hear him teach. I think he's so wise. But your third buddy comes along.

Come on, y'all. He's just putting on a show. My dad says he'll never make our lives any better and I agree. People need to focus on working hard and making life better.

Not about some crazy revolutionary. He's getting in the way. And you kind of have to agree. Yeah, I know. My parents told me not to get too close to him, especially if any rabbis were around.

[17 : 10] I don't want people to get the wrong idea. But I would love to see him do something cool. Isn't it interesting here? No one spoke openly about Jesus.

Neither the ones who liked him nor the ones who didn't. They whispered much muttering. But they were afraid. They were afraid of the Jews.

We get fearful when our comfort is at risk, don't we? Staying in just a non-committal unbelief here.

I mean, I kind of like Jesus stuff. I don't mind going to church occasionally. But nothing loud or bold or life-altering or uncomfortable for me.

like when I have the 153rd consecutive conversation with my neighbor about football and never mention Jesus. When at church I avoid the person I know is dealing with a really messy situation because I've got a busy week coming up and I don't know where that'll go.

[18 : 21] Like when I don't share honestly at Grace Group because talking honestly about my heart is uncomfortable and life's okay if I don't mess, let's not disrupt things too much, right?

Don't make me talk about Jesus and our relationship openly. Who might hear? What might it cost me? How might it wreck my week? Mary might whisper, I love you Jesus but not that much.

But then Jesus does show up midweek. Here's Jesus and he's going to expose the struggles religious church people specifically have with following him.

Verse 14. About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. The Jews therefore marveled saying how is it that this man has learning when he's never studied?

So Jesus answered them, my teaching is not mine but his who sent me. If anyone's will is to do God's will he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I'm speaking on my own authority.

[19 : 33] The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true and in him there is no falsehood. Has not Moses given you the law?

Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me? And the crowd answered, you have a demon who's seeking to kill you? Jesus answered them, I did one deed and you all marvel at it.

Moses gave you circumcision not that it's from Moses but from the fathers and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man received circumcision so that the law of Moses may not be broken are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?

Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgment. John doesn't even tell us what Jesus is teaching yet, that's coming later, but first he's dealing with our hearts.

Imagine Nicodemus being there, one of the Pharisees who had met privately with Jesus and he'll speak up by the end of this chapter. Imagine you hear Jesus teach and your colleague turns to you at the end, shakes his head, not even a single rabbi referenced and he didn't even quote C.S.

[20 : 58] Lewis or Tim Keller, John Calvin, none of them. Who does he think he is? You're still kind of intrigued by Jesus and then as you're listening you hear he starts talking about the law of Moses and you hear someone in the crowd yell, who is seeking to kill you.

I've heard a few discussions about that, you think? And then Jesus brings up the man that he healed on the Sabbath last year. No, Jesus, don't go there. It's so clearly against the law.

Quit making things more complicated for me. We know what the law says and we do it. And if you're doing signs and also encouraging law breaking, you deserve to die as a false prophet.

Now that is making me angry. Stop it! The love of our heart exposed here I think is our love for control.

Hang with me control freaks. I am probably worse than you. It's not easy. What do we want? We want to know more or do more to control our lives, don't we?

[22 : 13] At times, if we're honest, to control God. Listen to Jesus' challenge in verse 17. If anyone's will is to do God's will, then he will know whether the teaching, the teaching Jesus is giving, is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

He's telling us to come to him, to listen to him with appropriate humility. He says, if you come to God, actually desiring to learn to follow God's will, then although it sounds upside down at times, although it doesn't seem comfortable at times, you'll find that it's actually what God wants for you and what you were made for if that's the way in which you come to his word and seek to listen to Jesus.

But we like to think we know more. and crazy as it sounds, we like to evaluate Jesus' teaching on the basis of what we already know so that we stay in control.

If it sounds like he's telling me to love the poor sacrificially, that can't be right. That's the liberal left. God wants my individual freedoms, I know that.

And then I flip over, it sounds like he's telling me whom I can and can't be married to. That can't be right. That is the fundamentalist right again. God wants me to be happy, I know that.

[23 : 49] See how either of those will create a big struggle with following the real Jesus who doesn't fit in our nice boxes? But then what really gets us angry is when we obey, but things don't go the way we expect.

Yes? Yeah? Uh-huh? We think God's promised us. And Jesus, in the midst of our great obedience and careful law-keeping, has the gall to tell us that we don't keep the law.

What? He tells us we've been lost in the details and forgotten the main thing. The heart. Love for God.

Love for neighbor. See, Moses codified the laws about circumcision that were given to Abraham. Circumcised, he said, on the eighth day.

Whether it's the Sabbath or not, the Jews all agreed on that. That's what they taught. That makes sense, right? It's an important thing to do. But don't heal someone's whole body.

[25 : 00] You're missing the heart of the Sabbath, Jesus says. You've missed it. So for us, let me push us. Maybe it feels okay for us.

Maybe it's okay to identify as selfish. My money for me. To identify as gluttonous. My food for me.

To identify as impatient. My schedule for me. That's okay. But there are some things it's not okay to identify as, right?

We clear? You got me? We know it's acceptable. So long as we know which things God's okay with, we can keep the rules, those rules.

We're in control. Jesus says, don't assume your authority or control. don't come to me knowing more, doing more, thinking that's the way to get control.

[26 : 05] When Jesus says, my whole life screams, Yahweh, my Father is in control. We submit to Him. We rest in His grace, not our performance.

When our control is threatened, we are tempted, along with Nicodemus, to say, I love you, Jesus. but not that much. So what do we do?

That's a mess. That's a mess in here. I suspect we all see some manifestations of unbelief, some competing loves of worldly success, selfish comfort, or religious control.

We can see those in our hearts. perhaps feeling like pride, fear, anger. It's because we can't live for someone whose life works against what we love most, and Jesus loves not His own life even to death.

He eschews worldly success, selfish comfort, religious control, so following Him is a struggle. Christian, Christian, non-Christian, these loves of your heart are keeping you from following Jesus.

[27 : 33] That's what you're experiencing. That's what's going on in your heart. What's the treatment for heart issues like ones we struggle with? If it's not just an intellectual matter, you can't merely argue me into following Jesus.

You can't just give me a formula that convinces me that it is worth it to invest all that I have in Him, to be all in with Jesus, and that that's really where life is found.

So what do I do? Well, come back next week is one answer, because Jesus Himself explains more of who He is and how that gives us hope, and I hope you will, but there are a couple things already pointed to here in the midst of the many struggles we see with following Jesus.

The treatment for our hearts is repentance and faith. See, what we're talking about this morning is besetting sins in our hearts, right?

The love of control, of comfort, of success. These are idols that we sometimes love more than we love Jesus.

[28 : 44] At the end of the day, it's really the idol of self, isn't it? It's all about me, my control, my comfort, my success, so we fight idols like that by pleading with God to turn our hearts from the love of self back to Jesus because some of our great loves have to die.

If they remain our greatest loves, we will never embrace Jesus. And so we look back at Jesus and we realize that he has come to displace these loves by actually loving us more than we love ourselves.

See, there will be a day, it may not be this one where his brothers are talking to him, but there will be a day when Jesus will make a public showcase in Jerusalem to show himself to the world, to display his glory, just not in the way his family suggested, right?

he will go to the cross. Thankfully, we now can gaze on Jesus and realize that he never got to the point of saying, I love you, but not that much.

No, that's not what he says. He instead keeps going. He pursued glory through suffering. He purchased our ultimate comfort through deep pain.

[30 : 17] He put down control of his own life that we might live forever. Therein is love, amen? That's what love looks like, John tells us.

Love so transformative that success-hungry James sees the most amazing work Jesus ever performs on his behalf at the cross and is inspired to give his own life as a martyr for that life-changing reality of that love.

So transformative that comfortable risk-averse Mary meets the risen Jesus and can't stop sharing with anyone who will listen the good news of the Messiah who brings eternal hope and comfort in relationship with him even in the face of death.

So transformative that controlling religious Nicodemus finally starts seeing what the new birth that Jesus talked with him about really means that the son of man must be lifted up on the tree.

Oh I see it now Nicodemus says and when we believe in him we find new and eternal life. He is the one that's where life is found.

[31 : 32] Love so transformative that he dies for success-hungry comfort-seeking control-obsessed people like you and me so that we can even today find his love most fulfilling and his life eternally satisfying.

I pray we do. Father, so work in our hearts that Christ would be our true treasure.

that knowing that he is ours and we are his forevermore would thrill our hearts as a result would change our lives, would free us from the idols that we cling to, and would inspire us to live for him.

Holy Spirit, help our hearts. Give us faith. faith. That believes hope in Jesus, not hope in me.

That believes glory to come, not glory now. That believes comfort then and forever even if I don't taste it here.

[32 : 58] Help us, we ask, in Jesus' name, for his glory. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.