

**“The Cost of ‘Fellowship’”**  
Acts 9:1-20; John 21:15-17, 19b

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Before we begin our consideration of today’s Scripture, I want to first say to those of you who might be thinking that the sermon title is misspelled, NO, that last word is NOT supposed to be *‘fellowship,’* with an ‘E.’ You may have been thinking that we were going to consider the price we pay, literally and figuratively, for getting together for Family Night Suppers and other church events. NOT that these aren’t important. In truth, those times that we gather together in order to enjoy one another and to continue to strengthen those ‘ties that bind our hearts in Christian love’ are indeed VERY important. ‘Fellowship’ in the life of our congregation is synonymous with two other words that begin with the letter ‘F’: **Fun...** and **Family.** Oh yes... and **Food!**

But as important as it is to gather together for social occasions, what is of even greater significance is WHAT brings us together. Or more accurately, WHO brings us together. **Jesus Christ.** As I’ve said before, we are MUCH more than a civic organization like Kiwanis or Rotary. Yes, we can do similar acts of charity for our community... but our ULTIMATE motivation here must not simply be to ‘Do good,’ but to ‘Do GOD!’ How do we grow in our service to God as exemplified by Jesus Christ? As we consider the price that He paid for us... as well as the price paid by those who sought to bear witness to His perfect life... you and I would do well to consider **“The Cost of ‘Fellowship.’”**

No, you won’t find that word “fellowship” in my secondary reference book, Webster’s Dictionary. (I’m not sure that I made this word up... it may well fall in that ‘original thought that I haven’t had in years’ category). But there is actually an expanded form there: *“followership.”* It is defined as “the capacity or willingness to **follow** a leader.” (I just think my ‘contraction’ rolls better off the tongue ☺). But the best ‘definition’ comes not in **books** and **words**, but in the **actions** of **people**. In our passages today, we see three faces of ‘followership’... the ‘capacity or willingness to follow a leader’ as demonstrated by **Saul, Ananias, and Peter.**

**SAUL**, of course, was quite UN-willing to ‘follow the leader’ named ‘JESUS.’ In the opening verse of today’s passage we read that Saul was **“still breathing threats and murder**

**against the disciples of the Lord... any who belonged to the Way.”** (Acts 9:1-2) (Interesting phrase isn't it? **“...any who belonged to the Way”**? As the Jews were also known as a 'people of the Book,' Christians could be referred to as a 'people of the Way.' In those words of Jesus that I always use for a 'graduation ceremony'... to that 'institution of higher learning'... He told His disciples that He was **“The way, the truth, and the life.”** WHEN what church you attend comes up in conversation, (notice I said 'WHEN') tell them, 'F.P.C... you know, the 'people of the Way'...')

Anyway, Saul was definitely NOT a fan of Jesus and his band of heretic followers. He was a highly educated, long-time believer in the 'One true God of Israel.' In his later words to the Galatians, **“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”** (Galatians 1:14, NIV) Even though Jesus knew the Scriptures well, and would spend time in the temple, there was still too much of this mystery man from Galilee that went against those 'traditions' for which Saul was so 'zealous.' These 'people of the Way' threatened the status quo of his religion... too often they would break that '11<sup>th</sup> Commandment' of the 'institutional' church/synagogue: **“Because we've always DONE it that way.”**

So what happens? What usually happens when we humans get too filled up with our own headstrong, 'my way or the highway' attitude: we get ZAPPED! Like that 70's song made popular by Manfred Mann's Earth Band, but written by the Boss (Springsteen, not MY boss, God): He was **'blinded by the light.'** And Saul KNEW that this wasn't just some random lightning bolt. When he heard that voice that said **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** To which he replies, **“Who are you, Lord?”** (Acts 9:4-5) Saul KNEW that this miraculous occurrence HAD to be GOD... He just didn't know it was God's SON. Who proceeds to identify Himself... **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (Acts 9:5) Jesus then goes on to tell Saul that he is to go into the city of Damascus, and **“you will be told what to do.”** (Acts 9:6) And **“For three days he was without sight... so they led him by the hand.”** (Acts 9:8-9)

This **powerful, educated, zealous religious leader** who had so much clout in BOTH 'church and state' became power-LESS, led around by the hand like a child, being told what to do. AND by people that had much **different views** than he did, for whom he had little regard.

(Hmmm... 'powerful'... 'educated'... 'religious'... a 'leader'... people with 'different views'... he could've been *Presbyterian!*) Saul learned a valuable lesson about the Cost of 'Followship'... the need to **GIVE UP CONTROL**. Just when we get all full of ourselves '**being in charge**'... is just when God can do what happened to Saul: he got a '**charge**' out of life... Those times when we think that we have '**seen it all**'... is when we come to realize just how BLIND we can be..

Now, speaking of 'blind', enter **ANANIAS**. He is described simply as a 'disciple.' Tho his name might give us a hint... in the Hebrew and the Greek, "*Ananias*" means "*favored of the Lord.*" That would explain why his Lord speaks to him in a vision, telling him to go find this "Saul of Tarsus," and "**lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight.**" (Acts 9:12) At which Ananias, Saul's reputation having preceded him, balks. 'Favored' or not, this 'Damascan disciple' says, 'Oh wait now, God, this Saul guy is bad news. He can have me thrown in jail, or worse. Can we rethink this?! Surely there's someone *else* better qualified...'

And, given Saul's track record with Christians, his reluctance is understandable!

He is quickly reminded, however, of who is *really* in charge. That he has >> nothing to worry about because 'God's got this.' "**The Lord said to him, "GO, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen... I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."** (Acts 9:15-16) 'Just go and do what I have told you, and I'll take care of the rest... after all, you ARE my favored one...'

And so Ananias does. And, 'the rest is history.' All because he was **OBEDIENT**. This disciple trusted in God, not giving in to his own fears, and approached one who was 'hostile,' to say the least, to the 'Good News of the Gospel.' Just as we too might be called to approach someone who doesn't have a very high view of Christians. Because of his 'not-so-simple' act of obedience, he was a part of the greater plan of God that would use this seemingly quite UNlikely persecutor of Christian faith to become arguably its greatest proponent. Just as we too are part of God's plan...perhaps bringing healing to an unlikely future advocate of the Gospel. Like that song says, "*Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus... and to trust and obey.*" Another 'cost of followship'... **OBEDIENCE**.

Which brings us to **PETER**. Gotta love Peter. We ALL have a lot of him in us. Great disconnect with that last hymn: he sure *trusted* in Jesus... now the 'obey' part? THAT's another

matter... When Jesus first asked him the question, ***“Do you love me?”*** he’s probably thinking, ‘Oh, I GOT this. I may have blown some of the things he asked me before... let’s forget about that whole ‘cock crowing’ incident... but I KNOW the answer to THIS one!’ ***“Yes, Lord, you KNOW that I love you!”*** (John 21:15) To which Jesus replies, ***“Feed my lambs.”*** (John 21:15)

So Peter is thinking, ‘I KNOW we’re not talking *animal husbandry* here... Jesus doesn’t have any farm animals that I don’t know about?’ And while he was pondering just what this ‘tending lambs’ statement was all about, Jesus asks him again... and the, yet a THIRD time ***“Do you love me?”*** To which Peter continues to answer, ***‘Yes, Lord... you KNOW that I love you.’*** Then ***‘Feed my sheep.’*** And then, shortly thereafter, Jesus says, ***“Follow me.”***

I don’t know about you, but I think that the meaning of this to Peter... and to us, those ‘fellow fickle followers’ of his... is pretty clear. Love of God, in Christ, through the Spirit, is much more than a mental, emotional **assertion**... but a tangible **demonstration**. We are not to drift through life in a bubble of our infatuation with the Lord Jesus, but letting others POP that bubble so that we can show God’s love to them. How are you and I ‘FEEDING SHEEP’ as Jesus commands? How do we CARE FOR OTHERS? There are starving people out there... heck, in HERE.... Who need to be fed. Perhaps physically. Or emotionally. Psychologically. Spiritually. Relationally.

Yesterday at the Lake Charles church we celebrated the life of one of the ‘saints’ of that church, Miss Annabella Gorham... who died at 100 years young. And I do mean ‘young.’ I think of how much we talked about Annabella’s hospitality... always setting a banquet table filled with food and drink. But she also fed one’s SPIRIT. Like Rev. Boo Kay, my co-officiant and her niece, said, when she engaged you in conversation, her eyes locked on yours. You knew that you had her undivided attention. You were important. How do YOU let others know that THEY are important...? Believe me, with my A.D.D. tendencies, that FOCUS is not always easy for me...

In closing, I would share with you some of the speaker’s words for Thursday’s National Day of Prayer event at the Lake Charles Civic Center. **Darryl Strawberry**, a former major leaguer and perennial All-Star who rated comparisons with the legendary Ted Williams... except for his equally in-famous substance abuse and immorality. Now “Pastor” Strawberry, he gave a

powerful testimony of how he let his **EGO** (which he said stood for 'Easing God Out') ruin his life, until he finally submitted his life to Christ, and now is making a positive impact on thousands of lives, particularly in the areas of addiction and autism.

There were three quotes that caught my attention: 1) "We are afraid to show others our wounds." 2) "God has a plan... but can we say YES to Him? And 3) "At the end of the day it's all about winning... SOULS, that is." This last one was made so much more powerful when he talked about leading his long-estranged, deadbeat Dad to confess Jesus as his Savior... while he lay in a hospital bed, weakened and broken...

It seemed to me that these statements match up well with the experiences of Saul, Ananias, and Peter. Saul had to **give up control**... allowing others to care for his 'wounds.' Ananias was **obedient**... saying 'YES' to God's plan. And Peter? Well, a church that is about 'feeding sheep' and 'winning souls'... ultimately **caring for others**... was built on him. All of these in order to pay "**the Cost of 'Fellowship'**". The question we must ask ourselves is... "Is that 'cost' TOO much for us to pay...?"