Whose Are You? The Holiness of Belonging

Matthew 22:15–22 · Exodus 33:12–23 · 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 **[Slide 1]**

Imagine being asked to do something ordinary at work. You know how to do it. Your employer expects it. Someone respected in your church is waiting for you to finish. Everybody seems comfortable with what is happening—except you. **[Slide 2]**

That is where we meet John Woolman, a young Friend tending a shop and keeping the books for a merchant in colonial New Jersey.[1] His employer had sold an enslaved woman and asked him to prepare the bill of sale. Woolman felt the wrongness of making a document that treated another human being as property. Yet he also felt the weight of his position. He was an employee. His employer had directed him. The purchaser was an older member of his own religious society.

So he wrote it.

As the transaction was completed, he spoke against slavery. But afterward, his protest did not settle the matter within him. He had participated in something his conscience resisted. He believed he should have asked to be excused.[2]

Before we meet Woolman as someone courageous, we meet him as someone who yielded. That makes his story uncomfortable. It brings us close to the places where we know what we believe, yet struggle to live it when relationships are at stake.

Here is our question this morning: When belonging to God puts pressure on my belonging to other people, how do I remain faithful—and loving? **[Slide 3]**

THE PRESENCE WE NEED

In Romans, we wrestled with authority and allegiance. Caesar's claim has limits; God's claim reaches the whole of us.

Today we ask what that means when following Christ threatens the approval of people we love.

Last week's Exodus passage showed a community failing under pressure. Moses was away. The people became anxious, and Aaron accommodated their demand for the golden calf.

Now Moses seeks God for their future: “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here” (Exodus 33:15, NIV). **[Slide 4]**

Notice that little word: **us**.

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[1] Phillips P. Moulton, ed. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 29.

[2] Moulton, *The Journal,* 32-33. The first chapter records both the initial compliance and the later refusal.

Moses seeks God's presence for the people who have failed. He has confronted their sin, and he continues to plead for them. Their failure has not ended his responsibility to love them. **[Slide 5]**

That is a searching picture of **faithful leadership**. A parent can refuse to excuse a child's destructive choices and continue praying for that child. A church can address wrongdoing and continue seeking the person's restoration. **Love requires truth**, **and truth must remain accountable to love**.

Moses also knows that leadership requires more than his determination. He asks to know God's ways. He needs God to lead him as he leads others. There is humility here: he cannot manufacture the presence on which the community depends.

We need that humility too. Have I sought God's correction as earnestly as I have wished for theirs? Am I asking God to lead us, or simply to endorse me?

THE FREEDOM JESUS SHOWS

In Matthew, Jesus' opponents ask about paying the imperial tax, hoping to trap him. Their flattering introduction describes him as truthful and uninfluenced by people's standing. Then they test that freedom. **[Slide 6]**

We know something about questions that come with a demand for loyalty. If you care about this family, you will agree. If you belong in this church, you will keep quiet. If you are really one of us, you will take our side.

Jesus asks whose image the coin bears, then says, “give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's” (Matthew 22:21, NIV).

The coin bears Caesar's image. Genesis tells us that human beings bear God's image. That connection draws on the wider biblical story; Jesus does not explicitly state it here. But it makes his command searchingly personal. **We ourselves belong within what is owed to God.**

And the person pressing me bears God's image too. That matters… Especially when I begin to enjoy proving someone wrong. You see, You and I owe God our obedience, as so, don’t we owe that person the dignity that belongs to one of God's creatures. Their demand may need a firm refusal. Yet their humanity still requires my care. **[Slide 7]**

Expanding this:

If following Jesus always feels easy, perhaps we need to ask where we have allowed him to challenge us…

Sometimes we enjoy the satisfaction of contempt: “I am right, you are wrong, and I feel better about myself when I look down on you.”

Other times, we cling to the comfort of approval: "I know something is wrong, but I don't want to disappoint you or risk my place among you."

We can even do both—look down on people outside our circle while staying silent to keep the approval of those inside it.

Jesus reaches into both places. He calls us to love the person we would rather dismiss and speak truthfully with the person we are afraid to disappoint.

Can I disagree without contempt—and remain loving without surrendering my conviction?

If following Jesus always feels easy, perhaps we need to ask where we have allowed him to challenge us… How do we do that? How do we open ourselves up to correction?

[Slide 8] Trust… See that of God in Others

Back to Matthew 22:15–18

Remember the question they brought Jesus: Should we pay the tax to Caesar?

They wanted an answer they could use against him. Supporting the tax could alienate people who resented Roman rule. Opposing it could expose him to an accusation of resistance to Rome. **[Slide 9]**

Jesus recognizes what they are doing. He names their hypocrisy and asks why they are trying to trap him. Then he calls for the coin and answers their question by bringing God's claim into view. **He sees their intention clearly and he doesn't let their intention govern his response.**

That matters for us. Loving someone does not require us to pretend their behavior is harmless. We can recognize manipulation, name what is happening, and still honor the person's humanity.

But we also need humility: Jesus knew their hearts. We can misread someone's intentions. Before declaring that someone is manipulating me, can I ask, "Help me understand what you mean"? Can I listen when someone says I have misunderstood?

Opening ourselves to correction begins there: "Lord, show me what is true, including what is true about me." **[Slide 10]**

That helps us ask: Can I remain responsible for my response when other people are trying to determine it? Family-systems thinking gives us language for this struggle. Differentiation… This involves developing thoughtful convictions while staying meaningfully connected to others.

A Different Response Becomes Possible

Return to Woolman. His first response did not become the final word about his faithfulness.

Later, another Friend asked him to prepare similar paperwork concerning an enslaved person. This time Woolman declined. He explained that, although others in their religious community held people in slavery, he believed the practice was wrong. He asked to be excused and described speaking with goodwill. **[Slide 11]**

He could no longer let the community's acceptance of the practice settle his participation in it.

And remember the woman in the first transaction. Her life was affected by what these men considered acceptable. The consequences reached far beyond Woolman's discomfort. When protecting our acceptance becomes our highest concern, someone else may bear the cost.

Our daily disagreements are not equivalent to slavery. But his account exposes a pressure we can recognize: respected people can normalize something that Christ calls us to question. Even a religious community needs to be corrected.

Here is grace for those of us remembering a moment when we yielded. Christ's forming work reaches the place where our convictions have given way to our need to fit in. We can confess our participation, seek repair where possible, and learn to respond differently.

Picture a family conversation. Someone absent becomes the subject. There are jokes, accusations, and familiar stories. You feel the invitation to join in. Perhaps joining has always been your way of staying close. **[Slide 12]**

This time, you pause. You might say, “I care about everyone involved, but I am uncomfortable discussing her this way. Could we speak with her directly?”

You cannot guarantee their response. They may dismiss you or become irritated. You can take responsibility for what you say, acknowledge what you do not know, and keep offering honest relationship.

Closing: A Life Others Can Recognize

The Thessalonians show us how changed allegiance becomes a public witness. Paul writes of their faith expressed in work, their love expressed in labor, and their hope expressed in endurance. AND with the Holy Spirit's joy, others heard how they “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9, NIV). **[Slide 13]**

This is what we seek as followers of the Way: lives being formed under the present leadership of Jesus Christ. We gather to listen because he has something to teach us. We carry that listening into decisions because he has a way for us to walk.

Open Worship

In open worship, bring one relationship before God: a place where you feel pressure to agree, remain silent, or participate in something wrong.

Ask our query: Where is my need for approval making it difficult to follow Christ wholeheartedly? **[Slide 14]**

Listen with room for God to surprise you. He may strengthen a conviction, expose pride, or show you someone who has carried the cost of your silence.

Ask for the next faithful response: an apology, a respectful refusal, or a conversation you have postponed.

The Christ who calls us to belong to him is present to form us. We can trust him with the cost of following, and with the people we are learning to love. **[Slide 15]**