

Losing to Gain

David Flatt

There were times when Jesus was unmistakable and direct in His teaching. He once told a crowd to repent or perish (Luke 13:3). Other times, Jesus was mysterious in His message. He used paradox in His teaching. This method of teaching takes two seemingly contradictory concepts that convey truth. Jesus used paradox when discussing life and death.

Jesus was resting with the apostles at Caesarea Philippi. They were discussing Jesus' identity. Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In response to Peter, Jesus declared, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Jesus promised to give Peter the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Then, Jesus did something shocking. For the first time, He told them of His death and resurrection.

Peter was especially confused and angry at the news of Jesus' death. If Jesus thought He would simply turn Himself over to the rulers at Jerusalem, Peter would not allow it. Jesus rebuked Peter's resistance. Then, Jesus spoke to the apostles as a group. He taught them the paradox of life and death in the kingdom of God:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:34-38).

Jesus would die in Jerusalem but be raised to new life. Death would bring life. Likewise, to become part of the kingdom, disciples would have to die to live. But, how? We will focus on three important phrases of Jesus' teaching to understand this deeply perplexing paradox.

Understanding the Paradox

1). Whoever would save his life will lose it. Everyone wants to save their lives. No one wants to die. Also, everyone wants to have a good life. We want to have meaningful, enjoyable lives. But how do we gain such a life?

Most try to gain a good life on their own. We try to find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment without Jesus. Pursuing life without Jesus is dangerous. Such a life is motivated by covetousness. Jesus warned, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Life is not measured by our possessions or accomplishments.

We have a strong tendency to seek satisfaction and security in the things we acquire in life. Money, credentials, and status give us a sense of achievement and importance. However, if

we seek our life in these things, we will lose our life. Jesus says this with certainty. Life in this world will test what is in our heart. Life in this world will strip away our earthly securities and lay bare our hearts. This is what Job meant when he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21).

Our lives, possessions, and accomplishments are transient. They decay. They are unable to give life. Their decay only is a sign of death. Why would we try to find life in such insecure sources? We cannot save our lives. We need Jesus.

2). Whoever loses his life for my sake. In this phrase, Jesus teaches us about sacrifice. Sacrifice represents total devotion and commitment. We make sacrifices in life. We sacrifice money to go to college. We sacrifice time with our families to achieve career success. We sacrifice integrity to get ahead in life. When we seek to save our lives, we sacrifice the wrong things for the wrong reasons.

Jesus wants to refocus our hearts. He wants to refocus our priorities. He is the right reason and the right motivation for sacrifice. We are to give up selfish ambition for Him. Jesus wants us to share in His purpose in our lives and for our world.

Jesus was going to sacrifice Himself fully for the human family. This most generous act of self-giving love is designed to compel us to sacrifice for His sake. To this end, Paul wrote, “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

3). Whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it. The devotion that Jesus commands is not without purpose. Many are confused and mistaken about the expectations of Jesus. Some view Him as an authoritarian parent who commands by fear. Jesus promises that those who sacrifice their lives for Him will find their lives.

Jesus promises identity, purpose, and fulfillment through sacrifice. Jesus hinted at this in His ministry. For example, when He called Cephas, Jesus gave him a new name and a new task. Cephas became Peter. He went from being a fisherman to a fisher of men. Also, as the resurrected Lord, Jesus did this with Paul. Paul received grace and apostleship (Rom. 4:5).

These examples demonstrate how through faith in Jesus, we receive a new identity and a new vocation. This is how we find our lives, our true calling. We find our lives by believing and obeying Jesus, our Lord.

Conclusion

In time, Jesus would go to Jerusalem, die on the cross, and be raised from the dead. He paved the way to new life and the hope of eternal life. In our search for purpose, we need look no further than Jesus.

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:14-16).