

Losing to Keep

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Scripture: John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

I remember as a child, playing on the elementary school grounds during recess, climbing up the large metal jungle gym type structure onto the top of the swinging bars, and then standing on top of them. It was a good 6 to 8 feet high. And the playground was filled and piled high with pebble rocks which would help with cushioning the impact of jumps and falls. Well, the first time I decided to join the bigger kids in climbing up and jumping down from such heights, I made a terrible mistake that could have caused much more injury than I suffered that day. I didn't fully commit to jumping off the bars I was standing on. Instead of landing on the not-so-soft but impact-cushioning pebble rocks below, I came crashing straight down on the bars about 2 feet from the ground, the bars one would climb to be able to reach the bars above to swing from. I was writhing in pain for some time before I could get up and walk ever so slowly to the nurse's office. After seeing there were no injuries needing medical attention, I returned to class and I found out I was the talk of the school as the kid who, in their minds, almost died because I didn't fully commit to the jump.

Well, as in some cases they say to get back on the horse again, I in time climbed up the jungle gym again and stood on top of those bars with my friends quietly and expectantly watching. In fact, there were a few there who saw what happened before and said they couldn't watch and walked away. I knew what to do. I just had to do. I had to either fully commit and jump or slowly climb back down. I surely wasn't going to do what I did last time. Though I had fears of what had happened last time, I had more confidence in knowing I knew and could do what I needed to. I jumped a most successful jump that ended with great relief, excitement, and cheers from my friends. That was the beginning of many more fun jumps without any further injuries or embarrassment.

Of course, looking back at that now, I am amazed even after my accident that they let us kids continue to jump off that jungle gym for years and years, until I graduated from William Beaumont Elementary School in Waterford.

I'm not advocating such feats that could injure oneself, but rather wanting to emphasize that I learned about the costs of not fully committing.

The act of fully committing can be applied to so many areas of life. Whether it's in one's interests and goals, one's given tasks from parents, employer, or academic institution, or when it comes to family, friends, and partners. Sure, there's the matter of reaping what you sow, but then there's the matter and point of what happens when you don't fully commit to your endeavors.

When it comes to many parts and aspects of life, one could say it isn't so two-sided, but rather in degrees and sometimes delayed affects, if any come to fruition.

So, sometimes it's not so clear when you are in danger of under-committing until it's past the point of recovering or repairing or redoing.

I'm sure you can tell me stories of when you or someone you know learned immediately or in time the effects of not going all in, not giving it your all, not having your mind and heart fully committed.

You may have a memory of something happening when not fully committed, whether it was during your childhood, as an adult, while in school or at work, or as an individual or part of a group or family.

When it comes to learning how to drive, a lot of grace is needed for new drivers, especially when they are trying to use the freeway entrance ramp for the first time. One of several challenges for some is that of timing and fully committing to speeding up and merging with traffic. Typically, whenever safely possible, you'd move over a lane for the vehicles that have the big bright letters spelling "Driver in Training." I remember when in driving school with two others learning how to drive, and one scaring us all when it was his turn to drive. He scared even the driving instructor who thankfully had an extra brake pedal on the passenger side to prevent us from getting into accidents when one was certainly going to happen if he didn't apply the brakes at the right moment.

And there occasionally would be the drivers who do not want to give much grace but actually more real-life situations, maybe even believing they were helping the driver in training to have more experience with what they'd face without such kind gestures for new drivers. Though their thinking, which isn't totally off base, goes along with the idea that a driver in training should have much experience driving with all the real-life challenges, there's a difference between one who is learning how to drive and one who has at least had the basics. That's when the driving happens without the bright lettering, and they then won't be shown much grace at all.

Of course, there is the case where it goes overboard and becomes downright dangerous. Once when I was near the end of my driver's training, a pair of high school students pulling out of the school parking lot intentionally drove in the wrong lane, heading straight towards me in what seemed like a game of chicken. There were deep ditches on both sides of the road, so there was no room to safely swerve out of the way. I had already put my foot on the breaks to stop as soon as I knew I had to, before it was too late. But seeing their smiles as they neared, they did what I expected, and they pulled back into their lane before I had to apply the brakes. The instructor didn't need to apply the brakes, nor did he say a word as we just kept driving as if nothing happened. We had been driving long enough together that he had a sense that I knew what to do. Or it could have also been because such stunts had been pulled on the driving instructor before, and enough times that he didn't react in any way to give the dangerous jokesters the pleasure of seeing him upset. I kept a poker face as they drove by laughing at me, though it did alarm me at first.

Just think if I did not fully commit to staying as calm as possible as well as on the road and in my lane. Had I swerved in the only lane I had left, the wrong lane, and the other car swerved back into its lane at the same time with the intention of getting out of the way, we either would have crashed into each other or swerved into the ditches.

Though life is not like a game of chicken, where two drivers head towards each other and the one who swerves out of the way first is called a chicken, it sometimes can feel that way. By the way, the game of chicken should be called some other name that means a foolish way to get severely injured or die!

Being fully committed is not about trying to prove bravery or to see if you can overcome some kind of fear. We shouldn't see challenges in life that face us head on as way to take on chance or a gamble with something important, including decisions that affect your life, others, and you're your relationships.

So, when we hear of Jesus telling those who would place their faith in and choose to follow him, it's between his use of metaphors of how he will die to save others that we are told we must lose our lives in order to keep it for eternal life.

While Jesus says he was going to lose his life in order to save our souls, he tells all who would serve and follow him to not love their lives but hate their lives in order to keep it for eternal life.

First of all, we know that we are saved God's grace and our faith in Christ, not by anything we do. Jesus telling us to hate our lives does not mean we have to do something or not do something in order to be saved. We dove deep into the second chapter of Ephesians last week, especially verse 8 and 9, which remind us that is by faith in Christ and what he did, not by anything we do or could do to save ourselves.

Second, the verse that states that unless we hate our lives we won't keep it for eternal life does not mean we are to loathe our lives, despise it, or devalue it. Instead, by being told not to love our lives but to hate it, we are being told to focus all of our lives and everything we do for God

and God's will. This is a matter of fully committing your life to God. That full commitment to God, putting God first, does not exclude everything and every relationship, but rather includes, involves, and blesses all of them.

What Jesus said in today's Scripture reading reminds me of another time Jesus said something similar. Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, verse 26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

Again, this does not mean we are to hate others or ourselves, since that is the opposite of what we are taught in honoring one's parents and loving God and others as we love ourselves, the two greatest commandments that sum up all the other laws and commands. It is the degree to which we dedicate ourselves to Christ and follow him. That following Christ is paramount compared to all other things, including one's own life.

However, Jesus made such statements to emphasize putting God's will first above anything anyone, even self. The Greek word μισέω (pronounced miséo) in this context means more like detesting, but not in an adversarial way that the English word "hate" is used, and again to emphasize putting Christ and his will first and above all else.

Interestingly, we are not usually put in a position where we have to choose in such a dramatic or life-changing way as it would seem. However, the very decision to place one's faith in and to follow Jesus is in fact the decision to fully commit to the ways of Christ and his leading in your life. Surely there will be times when you must make a choice in how you spend your time, your money, your life in relationship with God, your family, friends, and those God calls you to serve and be a witness of Christ to.

So, the word "hate" used in translating what Jesus said is to strongly emphasize putting him first to everything else.

Another understanding of "hating" one's life is to see it in light of self-denial. To put Christ first in your life is to live a life of self-denial. To follow Jesus is to follow his ways and teachings that ministers to those who he called "the least of these," emphasizing that what we did for others is done unto him. Not only do we follow in the spiritual habits of praying, worshiping, serving, giving, and testifying, but also in striving to live our entire lives having Jesus first and the center of our lives.

This can be a tremendous challenge when the way you are used to doing certain things for so long, living in a certain way, seeing things in a certain way, and relating to others in a certain way for so long are all challenged in one way or another. When we come face to face with challenging issues, situations, and times in our interactions and relationships with others, we sometimes come to a place where we much choose how fully committed we are to Christ.

Though it may seem like I emphasize a lot on Christ's commands for us to love God and others, I know that if we truly followed his ways of love in our lives and how we relate to one another

more and more seriously and intentionally, then we would see the fruit of such loving ways Christ showed us in our families, communities, nation and throughout the world. We could better overcome issues that cause fighting, divisions, and even wars.

Among all the issues our nation has face, throughout it's amazing as well as tumultuous history, more recently there has been a resurgence of crimes and attacks against Asians. And as an Asian growing up, one thing I was taught was to not make waves, not to put myself in harm's way if possible, to be quiet rather than get into a fight or create battles that would be more of a waste of time or do more harm than simply being quiet would. I know this is not uniquely an Asian teaching, but when minorities are viewed with anger as a source of pain and trouble for others and the nation, whether seen as economical, social or of some other form of threat or attack, I'd get a call from those who care about my safety to be careful since there might be vengeance desired and thrown at me directly.

Basically, I was told to stay hidden and to not make for more trouble, even when it comes for me in the form of anger, verbal attacks and even threat of violence. That's the message I have been taught. And in many ways, it works. When someone has said to me to go back to my country, I don't even respond and keep walking as if it didn't even happen. There was time a group of my friends and I were walking and someone said that to us, one of my friends responded with saying he was born here and started walking towards the angry person who said such a terrible thing. We all grabbed him quickly and said it wasn't worth it. What we meant was that it wasn't the fight and possible harm if the other person had a weapon. We didn't want to find out.

The command to love, when fully committed to Jesus Christ and his ways, follows in the ways in which Christ stood up for those who were in the minority, those who were being shunned for one reason or another, and those who were deemed sinful or less than so to justify poor treatment or to be even seen and treated as less than human.

And when Jesus rebuked those who said and taught such anti-love and anti-Christ ways, and when I repeat what Christ said and did, it is not with hatred or the labeling of all others as haters or evil. Jesus said even the harshest things out of love and the desire to change hearts and evil words and behaviors.

We are all God's children, and we are continually being taught how to love one another. So, when Christ speaks harshly in rebuking those who are hurting a fellow child of God, it's not with hatred but with a passionate love that seeks equality and justice in the eyes of God.

Being fully committed to Christ means to put Christ's ways above your own, and not only when it's convenient, but especially when it's not, for the sake of God and others, especially the "least of these."

This doesn't mean you are never in the category of "the least of these." Remember the times when you have been, or felt like you were at one point or another, one of "the least of these." I

pray that you were treated by followers of Christ as with the same passionate love Christ showed and taught to all his followers.

Interestingly, I have been moved over the years to stop putting myself before God when it came to doing what was safe, protecting myself more than others, what seemed to be less trouble for me and others, and what seemed to be best for everyone in being silent and hidden. Fully committing to Christ for me has become more about me losing what was false security, and to lose more of my life to Christ as I live more fully for him and those he called me to love. And in doing so, I've come to discover more of the power in what Christ was saying in how losing your life for him; that we will find and keep the life Christ says is not only most important but that lasts forever.

Not only haven't spoken in solidarity and in alliance with those who have been marginalized, dehumanized, misunderstood, and mistreated, and with greater awareness, especially in the past year with how our Black brothers and sisters have been treated throughout the history of our country to this very day, I now do something untypical of me in choosing to sacrifice my own false sense of security and safety, by sharing that in the past year our Asian brothers and sisters in our country have been the target of attacks. I don't only say this in light of what the tragic and senseless deaths in Atlanta, where six of the 8 women killed were Asian. I say this now because most of us and our country doesn't know that since the Coronavirus arrived in the U.S., which we know came from China, there has been a tremendous and alarming amount of growth of angry violence and attacks on Asians in America.

The NYPD reported that in America, from the data they have, and understand not all violence against Asians are reported, that crimes reported against Asians in our country has risen by an unbelievable amount. It's not 10%, 25%, not 50 or 75%. It's not 100 or 200 or 500 or even 1,000%. The "Queens Chronicle noted back in September, NYPD data showed that there has been a 1,900 percent increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in New York City [alone] in the past year." (<https://www.thecut.com/2021/02/the-us-is-seeing-a-massive-spike-in-anti-asian-hate-crimes.html>)

And again, that's only what has been reported and recorded. There are many Asians who don't report attacks that are racially-based since they want to be quiet and not stir up more trouble or not make it worse for themselves and others.

I would not be surprised if it were over a 2,000% increase in violence against our Asian brothers and sisters in our country. That's simply almost unbelievable. And when I saw footage of such acts of violence and the videos of verbal abuse that turns violent, it not only breaks my heart when seeing many of them being the elderly who cannot even begin to defend themselves, but end up dying from the injuries.

It breaks my heart when the response to such facts are statements like, well there are so many other people who are victims of crime too, so why are you making such a fuss about it. And what about so many others who have been victims, you haven't said much about them, but you

choose to say something about this one group of people. Or don't point out only one group of people when there are other groups who have suffered so much also.

It would be like you sharing how you or a friend had suffered greatly or went through a tragic and traumatic event, and someone saying to you something like, well you're not the only one who has experienced such suffering. Please don't only focus on yourself. Look around you and see how others have suffered to and even more.

We in our right and Christ-like mind would never say such a thing, would we?

Being fully committed to Christ and in serving and following him as our first priority in everything we do and, in every relationship, allows us to see as Christ sees others, to act and respond to the pains, hurts, sufferings, and even deaths of our fellow members of God's family with Christ's love. We would do more than try to keep the peace, we would be active and passionate peace makers who advocate for one another as members of the family of God, engaging in spiritual battle and the good fight in and for Christ, the Prince of Peace!

Therefore, what Christ calls us to do is no longer loving our lives but hating it in order to keep it is about putting Christ and his will first in our lives as we follow and serve him. The word "hate" that seems extreme is used intentionally to make the point of how we are to make sacrifices and deny oneself, one's desires, one's privileges, one's sense of security, and one's sense of power in order to do put Christ first and live in love for God and others, doing unto others as we would be doing it unto Christ.

When we learn to lose our lives in living it all Christ, then we are keeping in step with the life that reflects the gift of eternal life that we have been granted in Christ, the eternal life we have to share with everyone.

By how we live each day, by how we live with and in love and support of one another, and by how we love those we have conflicts with, including our enemies, are all ways in which we live a life that has been found and saved in Jesus Christ. Live such a life that cannot but help share the saving grace of Christ by fully committing your life to Christ in order to truly live! Amen.