

Part 4: Tested with Grief

Matthew 19:16-26

Jesus' Pathway of Discipleship

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

When we follow Jesus Christ on the path of discipleship, the early part of our path may be an upward movement to where everything seems to go very well. But inevitably there is, on that pathway of following Jesus, a downward movement to where things do not go well. For we are tested...we grieve... we are tempted to do things that are not good.

Let us now hear the word that Jesus would proclaim to us, and let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, help us to say "Amen" to what you teach us in the midst of adversity. Teach us now, by your word, to follow you. May we receive the grace that you pour out upon us—grace that is greater than our sin, and our weaknesses, and is able to carry us through the darkest times. Speak to us of that grace. Through Jesus Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.

In the second half of the gospel, and particularly the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, there is a troubling section. It is a time when the good news appears as bad news to those who follow Jesus Christ. Into those moments, when they're following Jesus, he has set his face toward the cross in Jerusalem. He has said to them that they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. And they are continually in conflict with Jesus. They are strained to understand why they must go with him and die. There are losses of security because of threat; loss of hubris, because they thought they knew what it was all about, but they discovered they did not; loss of triumphalism—that maybe Jesus isn't going to be Messiah victor. Loss of control, because Jesus is leading them to where they do not want to go; loss of their adult preeminence—because children are valuable to the kingdom of God. Loss of their male preeminence—because women are valuable to the kingdom of God. A loss of wealth as a sign of blessing. One loss after another loss; the gospel is full of loss.

But there is gain in the midst of that loss. In order for us to fully gain the depth of Jesus Christ and gain maturity, Jesus would invite his disciples to engage in the Gospel: become perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect; become perfect, become mature and complete; grow up. In order to gain the kingdom of God and become mature, we must give up all things. It is in that downward movement of discipleship, that takes us into suffering, that suffering has meaning. And without Jesus in the midst of suffering, it can be meaningless. It is drawing us closer to God, and bringing us into intimacy with God, because we are letting go of all of the peripheral concerns of life.

It is a freedom to ask the really hard questions in the depth of the bottom of how things can go—to find out what life is really about—when we have lost and grieved. It is a temptation there, in the middle of that, to give up on ancient spiritual disciplines. Those themes have always referred to the dark nights of the soul, and coming up against the wall of unbelief: where we are tempted to say that God has abandoned us, and therefore, we should abandon God. It is a time of learning to simplify our life: to not have all the things we thought we needed before; to realize that we can't take it with us, and therefore, we might as well let it go. It's a time of facing the totality of evil in the world and the amount of darkness that's there, and not being naive any longer about a glib view of the Gospel. It is a surrendering to the grace and providence of God when all hell is breaking loose. The disciples were learning this the hard way.

I grew up in a metal-working family; we had a business where we created industrial parts for machines. And one of those parts needed to be hardened – to be put through a heat- treating process so that the soft steel could become hard steel, and it could be ground to a fine balance and measurement. It was hardened because it needed to be strong—to be enhanced and handle the extreme pressure, to close tolerances, and to have long wear-ability. The second half of the gospel—this time of being tested with grief—is about being heat-treated in the midst of the presence of God, so that we can handle the hardest stuff life can

throw at us.

There are both voluntary losses and involuntary losses that we grieve: things that we are asked to give up voluntarily, and things that are put upon us that demand us to give up when we do not want to. Sometime we are asked to give up a good thing for a better thing. Sometimes we are asked to give up a bad thing for a good thing.

In William Bridges' book on transitions, he talks about the importance of letting go of things of the past and moving through a time of transition, to embrace things of the future. There must be loss and letting go in order to gain what is to come. We can't have it all. In fact, those things of the past often hold us back from gaining the best things of the future. I recently spoke about this in the Lenten sermon series in the book of Exodus. If you'd like a more expanded understanding of this concept, then go on the internet to our NPC web site and find that series.

This young ruler—this young, wealthy man—had it all. He thought that, if he could gain more and more, he could actually gain the kingdom of God. It was up to him: 'Lord, what must I do to gain eternal life?' Isn't that the American question: What must I do? What must we do to make the life that we have better? What must we do to make the world a better place? What must we do to have success? What Jesus says to him is glaringly opposite to our cultural intuition: give everything away and you will have eternal life. Let go of the things you value—that hold you captive—and you will gain what God wants to give to you, that will last forever. What must I do? That loss of... 'what I can do on my own'... is at the core of this young man's perspective.

So many people understand that the first part of life seems to be the accumulation of things. But what Jesus says is that accumulation of things actually kills the life of the spirit. And so the young man is invited to give to the poor and sell everything so that he might store up treasure in heaven.

We go through many times of loss in life. We don't just come wealthy with goods and money, with lands and buildings. We come wealthy with education...with the inheritance of growing up in fine families...with good health...with a sense of the specialness of growing up in a country where there's freedom. We come with many good things; and Jesus underneath it all, says: "Let go."

In the last few years I've had many dreams that have haunted me about my past. One of the most significant is the recurring dream I have about wishing I could go back to the railroad tracks of my youth. That's a strange fantasy and I've tried to understand it on a number of occasions. I think I'm beginning to get it. I love trains. I've always loved big engines. I grew up in a time when we had the biggest steam engines in all the world passing by our house on a regular basis. It was wonderful to walk down the tracks and to see these huge steam engines pulling long freight trains up into the Santa Susana Mountains. We would often take car trips into the Tehachapi Mountains in southern California and we would ride along with the trains. What I would remember about riding along with those trains is what was going on in me while I was riding with my family in the car. I was also with my family in the house when I would hear those trains coming up the slope. I later realized that my desire to go back to the trains is a desire to go back and be in that nice family of origin, growing up. How many of us hunger and thirst to reclaim our days of the past? If we could just go back there and relive the 'good old days,' how much better life would be.

Well, part of the loss of life is that we're not going back. We're going forward. Whether we like it or not, we can't ever go back and reclaim those trains...that feeling...that sense of the way life used to be. And part of what this young man is told by Jesus is: you must sell all of who you are...and what you have...and you must move on to the kingdom of God. That's heavy grief.

I was talking with my father-in-law not too long ago, in the loss of his wife—my wife's mom. He was almost non-communicative in his retirement home environment. It took me a few minutes to catch his attention as he was seated there in a wheel chair. And when I would mention Edyth, he would start crying because of the powerful grief of loss. Finally he said, "I just don't have anybody here. I just can't talk to anybody here. I want to be able to think and talk. I want to be able to have a conversation, but most of these people don't want to engage. They're lost somewhere in their own grief."

Isn't it sad that the last years of our lives would be so buried in grief that we can't even communicate, or we don't have people to talk with? I was talking to my mother the other day and she said the hardest thing about being 88 years old is: "I've lost most of my friends, and I'm alone. Your dad's mind is going and I'm alone with him, as well." A grief of loss.

What Jesus is saying to us about the grief of loss that hits the young man early on in life, is that: you will eventually lose it all anyway, so why don't you understand that the kingdom of heaven is about giving it up now?

Judith Viorst, in her book, *Necessary Losses*, talks about the hugeness of giving up things that we thought we could have; the losses (the illusions... the dependencies...the impossible expectations) that all of us have to give up, in order to grow up. She talks about four areas of loss in her book: 1. That we have to move away from our parents is inevitable; that, secure as it is in that home that feels wonderful, we've got to let go. 2. We also come to an awareness that we have a limitation of power; we can't do it all, we can't make it all happen. We have to give up our expectation that it's all on us. 3. She also talks about the loss of dreams: things we had when we were children... when we were in our youth, and as young adults... and hopes and expectations of what life could be. And we realize, as we grow older, that those dreams will never be met. 4. She talks about the multiple losses in the second half of life when things start going wrong with our body... with our mind... with our relationships... when we've reached the pinnacle of life and we start going down hill.

Now this is the important moment where Jesus is speaking good news. When you believe life is going downhill, there is good news! Jesus is saying: 'Let it go and engage me. Be in my presence and follow me as you grieve the losses.' In the midst of those losses, you will be tested to do things that are not good, because we don't like grief; we don't like the pain; we don't like the suffering. Those are the times we are most tempted to do damage to our relationships. We are most tempted to manipulate our businesses and systems because we realize, in our grief, that we're in pain.

Saying "good-bye" is a hard thing to do. I'll never forget those two days when I said "good-bye" to my daughters, Tamara and Tonya, three years apart, when I dropped them off at college. I thought: 'I can handle this. This is no biggie. I've left them at other places before.' I found myself absolutely just dissolving into tears. I couldn't look them in the eye; I was melted. I was feeling totally at a loss because, deep inside me, I knew that the childhood that I had had with them... the youth that I had had with them... would no longer be a part of our home life. I had to say "good-bye" and let go. I had to put them in God's hands and say, "Lord, you've got to take care of them at these wild college campuses. There are scary people around there."

Jesus said to the young man (after he had told him to sell everything): "come and follow me." The good news, in all of the grief, is that we would follow Jesus in the midst of the darkness and pain. That Jesus is not one who abandons us, but one who is there deeply, and fully, and most intimately, when we are in grief. Jesus wants to make clear to the young ruler that, when he has grief in the loss of the wealth, Jesus will be there to lead him into a better place. There's a vital connection between loss and gain in the gospel: we grow by letting go. We grow by giving up. We grow by turning away from the life that we thought we could handle and hold on to—to the life that God has, that is a gift. How we deal with loss may block us, or free us. But we need to move on, in order to grow.

When the young man heard this word from Jesus—to let go and to follow—in the gospel it is dramatically clear that he was in deep grief, because he had many possessions. He had great wealth. He had everything going his way. He was probably good-looking, and successful, and talented; and he probably was the most eligible bachelor in the entire city or community. He went away grieving because, what he wanted to do was to make the kingdom of God and eternity happen—on his agenda. And you can't make eternity happen on your agenda. It can only be a gift given to you by God, through Jesus Christ.

The disciples were astounded at this, when Jesus said that the wealthy couldn't enter the kingdom of heaven easily. "Well then, who can be saved?" they said, because their view was: 'Well, the wealthy, at least, are going to make it because God is blessing them with all of this wealth.' And Jesus turns that

whole world upside-down to say that wealth is not a guarantee of eternity. In fact, it's just the opposite: you can't take it with you.

And so the disciples, even in their following of Jesus, realize: 'We've left everything, Lord, to follow you. What do we have? We'll have no houses...we'll have no lands... we'll have no money... and you're going to die. We won't even have you. In fact, we may lose our own lives.' But they knew, deep inside, that that was the core of eternal life: it was Jesus, himself—when all else is lost.

And so today, the invitation comes to each one of us—that we will go through times of deep grief and loss. We will go through many times of needing to let go, and times to say “good-bye.” The question for us is clear: Are we following Jesus when we are letting those things go? Are we stuck in a place where we can't let go... or we won't let go... and we're so angry that we have to let go... that we are going to do some damage? Jesus says: 'Become more aware. Relinquish those things. Detach yourself from the stuff you've held onto. Let go and walk with me.'

The Washington Post, not too long ago, had an article on “Fields of Battle and Chaplains in Iraq.” Christian Henderson, who is married to a Navy chaplain, talks about some of the things that happen on those fields of battle. One of the major things that happens is that the chaplains themselves have to let go of their very tight boundaries about how faith really works—because faith doesn't work so nicely and exactly on the battlefield. She tells the story about a rabbi, a chaplain, who has learned to speak Arabic, and a crucial moment when they're bringing in piles of wounded people—children and adults. This rabbi is confronted with all of these Arabs who are in pain and dying, and he sees them take a little girl off to the side because she has been set aside to be alone in a dark alley of the building. He goes over, picks her up, and holds her; and he sings to her Arab lullabies: a Jewish rabbi, in the chaplaincy of the military, on the field of battle, singing Arab lullabies. Now, here that doesn't play very well. But on the battlefield, it makes total sense because he has had to let go of his assumptions about the boundaries and the way God functions in love and grace; and he needs to find a way to be gracious to that little girl on the battlefield.

And so it is that Jesus invites us today—that whatever gains we have gained on our own... whatever education we have... whatever assumptions we have... whatever dreams and perspectives we have... to let them go. And as Paul says in Philippians, 'Whatever gains I've had because I have done these wonderful things: of being a Pharisee of the Pharisees... and being born a Jewish man... I count it as trash. For it is for Jesus' sake that I've suffered the loss of all things. I regard them as trash in order that I might gain Christ. I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his suffering, so that I can become like him in his death.' 'Forgetting then,' he says, 'what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of Jesus Christ...of the higher calling...of eternal life. Not because I'm making it happen, but because it's a wonderful gift of God, and God has given me everything I need.'

We are in grief...we will be tested...we will be tempted to do the wrong thing. Remember the words of Jesus: give it all away and follow me.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, may you be with us as we wrestle...as we are tested by the word you speak to us...as we are tempted to walk away without responding because we are so full of ourselves. Speak to us in the only way that you can: for it is only possible for us to come to your kingdom because you pour out grace upon us. It is in Jesus name that we pray, Amen.