

*Discipleship 202: Lose To Win*

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*Deuteronomy 15:1-2,7-11, 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, Matthew 25:32-46*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 25:32-46. Listen now to God's Word. "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Losing to win is a weird concept. Yet I learned in school sports. There are times when winning a game actually costs you a championship. If you play full out every time you're on the field, eventually you'll wear down. It's one thing when your sport has just a few meets or events. But in baseball where you play countless games, there are times you won't be at your best. No pitcher can throw more than a few innings, and so you have to pick and choose when you're likely to lose so that you have a chance at winning when it really matters.

Last week's SuperBowl illustrated how scoring a touchdown can actually lose the game for your team. The Giants were behind but close to the end zone, and there was only a little bit of time left in the fourth quarter. You'd think they would have wanted to get those six points. But the problem was, the sooner they got the touchdown, the sooner the Patriots would have a chance to score in the final minute. They needed to hold off as long as possible. The Patriots knew it, and they were ready to push the runner into the endzone to make him score so they could get the ball back. Sometimes you have to give up the touchdown in order to win the game.

In the Christian life, things are often backwards from what we naturally assume. Jesus taught that whoever would save his life would lose it, but whoever would lose his life for Jesus' sake would gain it in the end. If our world is topsy-turvy from sin, we shouldn't be surprised that God's way of making things right would seem odd to us. In our final two weeks on discipleship, we're going to talk about the concept of losing to win. Next week, we're going to look at sacrificial living. This week, we're going to look at sacrificial giving.

God built generosity into the core of Israelite society. Now occasionally a king of another nation forgave the debts of his people to shore up loyalty and favor. But through the law of Israel, God made the forgiveness of debts a way of life. Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year when debts were cancelled. God warned the Israelites that it would be sinful to become stingy when the Sabbath year was about to arrive. God commanded His people to be generous to each other. They weren't to charge one another interest. And every fifty years was to be a Jubilee. In the Jubilee year, in addition to the cancellation of debts, all lands were to go back to their original family of ownership, and all slaves were to be set free.

Why did God organize things this way? God made a covenant with His people – not just the whole of Israel, but with families. God wanted His people to live justly, that all would benefit from His blessings. It wasn't a complete redistribution of wealth, but it gave those who were poor and impoverished a second chance, and even a third and fourth and fifth chance.

God promised blessings on the Israelites for being generous with one another. Sadly, we aren't sure that many Sabbath years were observed, and there's no record of a Jubilee year ever being celebrated. This was proof of Israel's disobedience to God. We're told that the exile of Israel in Babylon lasted one year for each Sabbath and Jubilee year the nation ignored. Generosity is serious business to God. It is meant to be a cornerstone of our relationship with Him. God is generous with us, and so we are generous with others.

But Jesus takes it a step further into territory that makes us nervous. Jesus makes it an issue of eternal life and death. In today's passage from Matthew, we see Jesus separating out the nations like sheep and goats. One group receives his blessing; the other his curse. Both are shocked by what Jesus says. What it boils down to is this one thing: what we do or don't do for the least among us is what we do or don't do for Jesus. At first, it seems that salvation maybe doesn't depend on Jesus but on what course of action we take. But that's not the fundamental lesson. This passage is the final parable in a series of parables about preparing for the arrival of the kingdom of God. God is saying, "Be ready for my return. Live your life in such a way that it is clear that you belong to me."

Jesus teaches that faith is more than a feeling and generosity more than a buzzword. Real faith is demonstrated by acts of compassion. It isn't our giving a drink or providing clothing that saves us. Those actions merely demonstrate our thankfulness to God for what's He's given to us. In the Old Testament, God sprinkles around reminders of His goodness, saying, "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt." The reason for obeying the Law always went back to God's grace. And so it is for us. Our Savior not only gave His life for us, He lived among us, healing the sick and proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom. The New Testament always brings Jesus to the forefront. We act because God has already acted on our behalf.

What's so interesting to me about the sheep and the goats is the amazement of both groups as to their standing before God. Both are utterly clueless! The first group says, "When did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink?" This group takes what Jesus says very literally. They housed the stranger and visited the sick and imprisoned – it was their natural way of life because of their thankfulness for the forgiveness Christ purchased on the cross – but they never saw Jesus personally to do these things for Him. Their first response is one of integrity...they didn't want to take credit for something they didn't do. Then Jesus explains – when you did those things for others, you did them for me.

Songwriter Keith Green put this parable to music and how he interprets what the goats say really hits home. In his retelling, the goats say, "Lord, there must be some mistake, when? I mean, that's not fair, well, would You like something now? Would one of the angels like to go out and get the Lord a hamburger and a Coke? Oh, You're not hungry, yeah, I lost my appetite too. Uh Lord uh, Lord, when were You naked, I mean Lord, that's not fair either Lord, we didn't know what size You wear. Oh Lord, when were You a stranger Lord, you weren't one of those creepy people who used to come to the door, were you? Oh, Lord, that wasn't our ministry, Lord. We just didn't feel led, you know?" Ultimately, this parable makes it very clear that your faith will affect what you do. A genuine believer will obey what God desires, not to earn salvation but because it demonstrates we are His children. Many will come on that last day begging to be let into the Kingdom only to be refused because they saw Jesus as a means to a selfish end. The sheep, on the other hand, honor Jesus as the Son of God and serve others in thanksgiving for the service He did for us on the cross.

So what does this all mean for us as we attempt to be faithful disciples of Christ? As I looked at these passages and others on compassion and generosity this week, I see a few biblical ideas. *Giving biblically is less like math and more like meaningful sacrifice. It's less like fairness and more like forgiveness. It's less like success and more like sowing seeds.* These three concepts can get us into the biblical mindset of generous discipleship.

First, *it's less like math and more like meaningful sacrifice.* If you're like me, my first thought about giving is about what it's going to cost in time and energy and money and then figuring out the equation. How much effort and cash is going to qualify me for the sheep line? That's my sinful human nature talking, and I need to admit it right up front. We'd like to know exactly what's expected of us. This is a real issue we deal with. I've had someone ask me if it was OK by God if they split the 10% they gave between the church and their favorite charities. We want to know the minimums.

But God doesn't work the way we do. God asked the Israelites for a tithe, a tenth, of everything up front – but when we count up all the various tithes and offerings the Israelites were to give, it came up to roughly a third of what they earned every year. Jesus asked one rich man to give everything he had away so that he might become a disciple. Jesus praised Zacchaeus for making things right by giving half his wealth away and making right all the financial wrongs he'd done. When Jesus saw the Pharisees bringing huge amounts of wealth in as offerings, he commented that the widow who'd given her one little coin had actually given far more. We can't nail down God to give us an equation of what real generosity looks like. It's a heart issue that affects each one of us.

When we look at Scripture, we don't find a "give until it hurts" ethic or people giving away everything. Instead, there's a paradigm we find in Acts 4. There were no poor among the believers in Jerusalem because from time to time, those who had lands or houses sold them and gave the proceeds to the disciples to distribute as needed. That was significant! They weren't left impoverished, but it was a gift they would notice was gone.

In the New Testament, we see that God is the one in control and He gives us good gifts as He sees fit. God's desire for us is to make a meaningful sacrifice of whatever it is He has given to us in service to Him. When I see the help Jesus mentions in the parable of the sheep and goats, I don't see any of those tasks requiring an overwhelming amount of wealth, though each one represents a material gift. But each one of them requires perhaps the most precious thing in our modern era – time. It takes time to clothe and feed and visit and nurse and house.

Many people throw money at problems in the hopes they'll go away – I read recently that some charities have done well receiving donations by text because they're done quickly and on impulse. But finding those who will serve with their time is often harder. The truth is, God hasn't given all of us money we can give away, but everyone has something, time or talents, which can bless others. We should give something of every part of ourselves in His service.

One of our roles as a church is to help those opportunities happen. We've got everything from our food pantry to serving a meal for the homeless in a few weeks to helping with our Free Meal and a Movie or making backpacks for our Headstart kids. The church has financial needs that you can help us meet, and there are ways through the church you can help around the world, through our Compassion child Tania or the missionaries who we've supported. There are ways you can make a meaningful sacrifice right here in this community. I encourage you to pray about what meaningful sacrifice God would have you make.

Next: *giving biblically is less like fairness and more like forgiveness.* Surprisingly enough, while Scripture calls us to be wise as snakes and as gentle as doves, I never see where we are called to be anything but extravagant in our giving. Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver and is able to make grace about to us through supplying our needs, so give generously. When Jesus talked about loving our enemies, He described loving them extravagantly – going the extra mile for the soldier who made you carry his pack and giving your tunic to the man who demands your cloak. The cross itself is an event of extraordinary generosity towards us because we did nothing to deserve it. In fact, He was crucified by those He came to save. In the cross, we see utter forgiveness, not fairness.

The reasons I have heard over the years for not giving often stem from an unbiblical demand for fairness. "It's unfair to give to those overseas when there are people suffering in our country. It's unfair to give money to this person or that person because they don't belong to the church. It's unfair to give to them because they'll just use it on alcohol or drugs or lotto tickets. I earned my money fair and square and they're looking for a handout." Now certainly we want to be careful with our giving – we don't want to be an enabler that helps someone stay in a life of sin and addiction – but fairness isn't really a factor.

Could you imagine if Jesus said that everything was to be fair? “It isn’t fair that I should die for those thieves and murderers, for those gossips and busybodies, for those liars and cheaters, for those holy rollers and pagans and hypocrites.” How awful that would be! Romans 6:23 tells us that the wages of sin is death. We’ve all earned death. The fair thing for us is an eternity separated from God. But that same verse goes on to tell us that the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. We don’t need fairness. We need forgiveness. Just as we have been forgiven, let’s show grace and forgiveness to others through our giving.

Finally: *biblical giving is less like success and more like sowing seeds.* Remember how we talked at the beginning about sometimes we have to lose to win? Giving often feels much like that. Giving rarely feels successful. There’s a proverb – not a biblical one – that if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. It’s a nice thought, and often it’s true. Our church supports Hope Center precisely because it’s a “leg-up” kind of organization that works to get folks out of poverty.

But there are some people who can’t get a leg-up. They simply need help. And even though we do help some people find their way on to bigger and better things, as our passage from Deuteronomy said, there will always be poor people in the land. One person moves up and another moves down. There’s always going to be someone else hurting, someone else needy. If it’s true for individuals, it’s true on a bigger level too. Churches always need money to pay the bills. There will always be diseases needing cures. There will always be natural disasters that need our assistance. If we look for success from our giving, we may find it overwhelmingly depressing instead.

But if we look at giving as a way of sowing seeds, we will look at successful giving a very different way. Giving gives us a means of spreading the gospel. It lays before us opportunities to show the love of God to those who might not otherwise know Him. Through giving, we can show the passion we have for Jesus. Giving even sows the seeds of the gospel in us! When we give, Paul says, God will enlarge the harvest of our righteousness. We may not see a lot of success in getting everyone out of poverty or curing every disease or paying every bill, but we will see people coming to Christ because of our generosity, which is true victory.

Don’t be afraid to lose in the short term in order to gain in the long term. Don’t miss out on the opportunity you have to show God’s love for you in your generosity. When you give of whatever it is that God has given you – your time, your service, your gifts, your money – you are investing in the Kingdom of God...the only truly safe investment there is. What treasures will you find you have stored up when you reach the eternal home God has prepared for you?