

America loves a winner. That's an old saying that expresses a cultural bias towards winning. We spent the last week hyper-focused on who won and who lost (and I'd remind you Jesus is still on his throne). I have a bent towards winning. I'm very competitive, I love games, sports, want to accomplish goals, and really don't like losing. What about you? Most people I know want to win, whether it's in your business, at a game on your phone, or the neighborhood competition for yard of the month. We want to win! And that's what makes today's passage in Luke so difficult.

This morning Jesus is going to teach what I believe to be one of his most challenging lessons for those of us who desire to participate in God's succession plan. He will make the very clear point that, if you want to win, you'll have to lose. That goes for him, and it goes for us, but many of us simply don't like it. For some, they hear "lose" and believe the Christian life is one of scarcity and misery. For others, they count the cost and simply say "No thanks. It's not worth it." But Jesus would disagree and he's going to show us that **when we lose, we win**. And that all starts with what we believe and declare as true.

[Luke 9:18-20] ¹⁸ Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ¹⁹ And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." ²⁰ Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God."

Throughout his Gospel Luke brings his reader to a decision point. He spent 8.5 chapters establishing who Jesus is through witnesses around his birth, Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom, own words about himself, and miraculous acts, and his disciples teaching and miraculous acts. Now it's time to come to a conclusion.

Jesus asks his disciples two questions: the first asks what's being said about him by the crowd. The second, though, is more personal. Jesus looks at his closest followers and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" **It's the most important question ever asked, and the most important question ever answered.** AW Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." That's the heart of Jesus' question. He's asking his disciples, and he's asking you and me, to make a decision about who he is.

Peter responds for the whole group and answers "The Christ of God." It is more than a fact. It is a confession, a declaration, a formal proclamation that declares what is true and commits to living out that truth. We declared our independence on July 4, 1776 and lived as a free nation. We declare our love for someone and act accordingly. In Repurposed, we declare our two words and, in so doing, go public and commit to live those out. And here the disciples answer Jesus' question with the declaration that he is the Christ, and the rest of their lives hinge on that truth.

How do you answer it? Have you declared Jesus to be your Messiah? How has that been a hinge moment in your life? I was in my bed at age 24, middle of the night, tears in my eyes, when I declared Jesus as the Christ, and it changed the trajectory of my life forever. **It is, without exaggeration, the most important decision you will ever make.** If you haven't made that declaration or are thinking about it, let's talk.

Now, if Jesus is God's Christ, and he is, that has significant implications for Jesus and for us because it defines what it means to win and lose.

[Luke 9:21-22] ²¹ And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, ²² saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Jesus affirms this glorious truth but follows it with something the disciples never expected to hear. For those of us on this side of the resurrection, we hear "the Christ" and immediately think "God made man, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on the Cross for our sins, rose three days later, ascended into heaven, and will return one day in glory." But that's not the way Peter meant it. Jews were looking for a political Messiah who would vanquish all of Israel's enemies and establish his Kingdom forever. Jesus will eventually do that, but his mission now is to defeat another enemy, and to do that he will have to suffer, be rejected, and die. He agrees with the disciples' thinking about how all this will end and will even give them a taste of it soon, but this is what it's going to take to get there. **In order to win, Jesus is going to have to lose.**

Does that offend you? Does worshipping someone who had to die, had to lose, appeal to you? We are about to enter the season of Advent, and we usually spend time in Jesus' coming, which we'll do, but this year we will also be in the part of the story where Jesus suffers, is rejected, and dies. It will be a time to remember why he was born and be reminded of what he chose to go through because of his everlasting love for us.

And as we celebrate Christmas, let's remember Easter, because Jesus adds one more detail. **He has to lose, but all is not lost.** After three days, he will be raised to life. We now know what that means, but the disciples likely didn't. All they saw was loss and confusion. But Jesus is saying in being raised he will accomplish the mission and declare victory. **Jesus will lose to ultimately win.** And what does he win?

[Romans 5:10] ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Jesus endured the loss at the cross, but the result was victory over sin and death, reconciliation of man to God, and the joy and glory of accomplishing his Father's mission. **Jesus won by losing, and so do we.** But if Jesus being the Christ means that for him, what does that mean for those of us who follow him?

[Luke 9:23-27] ²³ And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷ But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

Jesus lays out what it means to come after him, to be his successor, to be a disciple. **If he is your Christ, life will be hard.** Jesus' call is to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus every day. Each of those commands leads to loss, yet Jesus calls us to it because he knows it ultimately leads to winning.

To deny ourselves means we lose our will for God's will. Our personal ambitions and desires become secondary to what God wants for us. That could mean extending forgiveness when we've been hurt, making a difficult vocational choice, ending a relationship that is outside of the bounds of Scripture, or spending your resources on something other than yourself. There are few ideas more contrary to the world's view that we should indulge every desire today. You do you, you can have it all, no one is the boss of me. But for a disciple of Jesus it's "Your will be done."

To pick up our cross is to lose our reputation and possibly our safety. In those days, cross-bearing was a visible, public declaration of submission to the authority of the state, that the state was right, and the criminal was wrong. For followers of Jesus, it is a declaration of identifying with him, admitting he is right, and submitting to his authority. Additionally, picking up our cross means walking the same path of rejection and suffering Jesus walked. The disciples likely experienced some of this already, being mocked and rejected, asked why they would give up everything to follow Jesus. That will continue for many of them, even to the point of martyrdom.

This might be the most difficult challenge Jesus calls us to. We've talked about the growing chasm between biblical and cultural values, and more of you are feeling like you're on the outside, experiencing condemnation, isolation, relational strife, and suffering. We cannot be surprised when it happens, and it's why we must stay close to Jesus and one another.

To follow him daily means to lose our autonomy and self-sufficiency. A declaration of Jesus as the Christ is not a one-time decision. It is a call to follow him day after day and be transformed by his grace. It means he is the director and guide and we are the directed and guided. You go where he goes, and if you walk in the footsteps of Jesus you inevitably wind up at the cross. We are to walk his path, walk in his way of life, and walk in the mission he leads. **Your life is defined by his life.** If you were to calendar it, every day would start with the appointment or reminder to "Follow Jesus".

So, you in? Jesus does not mince words. He sets the bar high and wants his followers to know there is a cost to following him. That leads some to conclude there is no joy, no delight, no fulfillment, no fun. Just forgo anything you want, suffer with a cross on your shoulder, and collapse into heaven. For others, the pull of their desires and the idea of suffering are too much to bear, so they opt out. They count the cost and say, "No thanks". That's happening in the church today, which is another source of pain and loss for us, when people we care about leave. Are you ready to check out? Are you ready to no longer incur the loss? Do you look at your Christian life and think "this is all there is?" Does the overwhelming stress of the last year make you just want to retreat into the shadows and tend to yourself? If Jesus stopped there, I'd be right there with you. But he didn't. **There's more, and it's beautiful.**

Here's the offer Jesus is ultimately making: Lose this life because I have won you another.

The life I have for you is infinitely better than the one you are trying to hold on to. Lose to win. He knows how many of us will try to hang on to, preserve, save that old life, but the consequence will be missing out on the life Jesus has for us.

When Martha buys me a nicer item of clothing, I have the habit of letting it sit in my closet. I'm preserving it, saving it. I don't want it to get worn out, so I wait for this special occasion that never seems to come. I want to save my shirt. I don't want to lose it. But by saving it, guess what? I lose it, because it never gets worn. It never does what it was intended to do.

That's what Jesus is saying here. **If we don't lose our lives, we are going to lose them anyway.** If we try to preserve our agenda, our desires, our self-satisfaction, our self-righteousness, we will forfeit what our lives were truly intended for. That's the heart of God given purpose. **It's only when we lose our lives that we win, because Jesus gives us the life he's won for us.** And that life is anything but miserable, stale, or characterized only by pain and suffering.

The life he wins for us is both eternal and abundant. Part of denying ourselves means admitting we can't save ourselves. When we admit we're sinners and can't make it right, we lose our life so that Jesus can save it. The life he gives is one of hope, joy, forgiveness, peace with God, freedom from shame, an intimate loving community, and an eternal inheritance we can't lose. And the abundant life is the purposeful life, awakened to God's call in my life and the daily adventure of following him, even in times of suffering. It's a life of meaning beyond ourselves, impact beyond what we can imagine. It's why I love how we are doing baptisms once per week because it is story after story of the life God has won for our people when they choose to lose the life they had. It's a picture of the life available to you. **All you have to do to win it is lose.**

“It is not what we do that matters, but what a sovereign God chooses to do through us. God doesn't want our successes. He wants us. He doesn't demand our achievements; he demands our obedience. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of paradox, where through the ugly defeat of a cross, a holy God is utterly glorified. Victory comes through defeat; healing through brokenness; finding self through losing self.” -Chuck Colson

Where are you trying to win where Jesus wants you to lose?

What are you holding on to that God wants you to let go of? Where are you finding hope, security, satisfaction that is a mere imposter to true fulfillment? Stuff, people, election results, busyness? Ask him to reveal that to you and help you lose it so you can win.

What are you losing because you are trying to win?

Jesus said if we don't lose our life, we'll forfeit the life he has won for us. But he does not ask us to give up something good for something not as good. What he has to offer is infinitely better. Ask him what you are losing by not losing, what you are forfeiting because of what you are trying to save. Then ask him to change your heart and be willing to let go, knowing that when you lose, you win.