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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #34
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Sermon Summary #34

When Hating is Loving John 12:20-26

If you look up the word “paradox” in Webster’s dictionary you will find this definition: “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense, and yet is perhaps true.”

I’m going to say something this morning that will sound like a paradox. Some of you will be less kind in your judgment and insist that it is a flat-out contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. But I promise you it isn’t. I can go even further and assure you that until such time that you understand, embrace, and experience this glorious paradox your life now will count for nothing and your life in the age to come will remain in serious jeopardy.

The Greeks seek an audience with Jesus

The context for our paradox is the approach of a group of Greeks or Gentiles who were seeking an audience with Jesus. We see this in vv. 20-22.

These are men who admired much of what they saw in Judaism without becoming official converts. They regularly attended the great Jewish feasts in Jerusalem, such as Passover that was shortly at hand. They had obviously heard of Jesus and wanted to meet him. We can’t be certain why they approached Philip, but it may be because, although Jewish, he had a Greek name.

So, why do they want to see Jesus? It may be wrapped up in something that John omits. There is a two-day gap that had elapsed between v. 19 and v. 20 here in John 12. Following the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (vv. 12-19), Jesus entered the Temple and routed the money changers and drove out those who were defiling what Jesus called a house of prayer. This would likely have been the second time Jesus turned things topsy-turvy in the Temple. We looked at the first occasion back in John 2:13-25. That event occurred at the beginning of our Lord’s public ministry. Now, near the close of his ministry, some three years later, he once again enters the Temple and both cleanses and judges it.

We know from Mark 11:17 that Jesus referred to the Temple as “a house of prayer for *all the nations*.” And the Pharisees themselves say in John 12:19, “Look, *the world* has gone after him.” These two statements may account for why these Greeks now approach Jesus. They have heard that what Jesus has come to accomplish was not solely for the people of Israel but for all nations, the Gentiles included.

In this reference to the Greeks seeking out Jesus, God is telling us that Jesus is the long-awaited King not only over Israel, not only over the Jewish people, but also over the whole world. Back in John 12:13-15 we are told that when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey that he did so in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. The people shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even *the King of Israel*” (v. 13). And again, in the words of Zechariah, as quoted in v. 15, the people of Israel are told to “fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, *your king* is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.” Perhaps the approach by these Greeks is John’s way of telling us that the Lordship and sovereign reign of Messiah Jesus is now extended to include the entire world. *Jesus is King over all nations*.

We don’t know if these Greeks ever actually made it into Jesus’ presence. John doesn’t tell us. What he does tell us is that Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v. 23). At first glance this may not make much sense to you and me. But I think I understand what Jesus is saying. It likely is something like this:

“You say there are Greeks who want to meet me. Well, before they even arrive, it’s important that you know there is one thing about me that matters for Greeks, for Gentiles, for you who are Jews, and yes, for all of

you at Bridgeway Church in OKC, indeed, for everyone: ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’ The one thing they need to see about me is my dying.”

I get the sense that Jesus wants them and us to understand that the single most important thing about him is that he is about to die in Jerusalem, that he will be nailed to a cross, and that in doing so he will not only make provision for the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in him but also that he will be glorified by his heavenly Father. This is a truth that Jesus will unpack for us in John 12:27-36. But for now, he draws everyone’s attention to this one thing:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

Clearly, Jesus is using a “grain of wheat” to illustrate how his death will bring life to many. As D. A. Carson has explained, “like the seed whose death is the germination of life for a great crop, so Jesus’ death generates a plentiful harvest” (438). By dying, he brings life to both Jews and Gentiles.

The Paradox

But our Lord’s words then take a turn that is somewhat surprising. He moves from the necessity and consequences of his own death to ours as well. If, in the case of Jesus, death is the necessary prelude to life, so too there is a sense in which if we wish to live, we must die. ***Death to self is the necessary condition for life in Christ.*** This is a truth that Jesus articulates on several occasions. In Mark’s version, it is somewhat lengthier than what we find here in John 12.

“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘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?’” (Mark 8:34-37; cf. Matt. 16:24-26).

From both this passage in Mark and the one in John 12 we see that “losing your life” and “denying yourself” and “hating your life” all refer to the same thing. These are all different ways of describing what Jesus means when he speaks of us taking up our “cross” and following him. Likewise, “saving your life” and “keeping it for eternal life” both refer to the same thing. Here is my paraphrase of what I think Jesus is saying:

“If you are determined to save and love your life in this world, you are going to lose it in the world to come. But if you are determined to lose and hate your life in this world, you are going to find it in the world to come, that is, in eternity.”

This obviously calls for some explanation. So, let me slow things down and try to make sense of this for all of us.

To “love” or “save” your life in this world means to pander to self. It means you make your own soul the beginning and end of all your endeavors. It means you selfishly indulge yourself, for the sole sake of yourself, without regard for Jesus and his glory.

Self-centered, self-absorbed pursuit of personal goals without regard for Jesus Christ and at the expense of others is spiritually fatal.

This sort of self-love and self-centered living is at the heart of the world system in which we live. Self-centered living is perhaps the highest value of our secular, Christ-denying society. Everything in our world today is energized and orchestrated around the pursuit of self. Whatever makes your “self” feel good is the right thing to do. Whatever affirms your “self” and brings pleasure to your “self” and gives meaning to your “self” is the right choice.

So, what then does it mean to “lose” your life or to “hate” your life or to “deny” yourself? Well, let me tell you what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean you always have to turn down that second piece of pie or that third scoop of ice cream! It doesn’t mean you should neglect routine personal hygiene. It doesn’t mean you refuse to alleviate your pain or that you must decline every opportunity to have fun.

It does mean, on the other hand, the end of “self” as the ruling passion of your life. It means the end of all self-will and self-seeking and self-assertion that has “self” rather than Jesus Christ as its goal.

Let’s be clear about something. Jesus isn’t suggesting that we simply add him in alongside all of our other hobbies and interests in life. He isn’t asking his disciples here, nor is he asking you and me, to include him as just one more option in our many pursuits. He isn’t asking that you slip him in between your job and your family and your money and favorite sports team and your exercise routine. No, what he is saying is that ***to follow him you must die to yourself and to everything else that might be a rival to his preeminence in your heart and in your mind.***

“I and I alone,” says Jesus, “must be the all-consuming center and passion and driving force in your life.” Who else besides a certifiable nut case or God could possibly make such a demand? Here Jesus is saying that if you want to follow him, he must be the focus of every breath you breathe. He isn’t asking you to quit your job or to perform your tasks at a lower level of excellence. He isn’t asking you to cease playing golf or to settle for mediocrity in your life’s pursuits. He is simply saying that in all you do, do it with a view to his glory and honor and to display for others that he is the preeminent treasure in your life and in all the universe.

Every dollar you earn or spend ought to provoke unending gratitude to Jesus Christ. Every hobby you pursue should put his greatness on display. Every trial you endure and every pain you suffer and every challenge that you encounter should be faced with the question: “How might this create in me deeper dependence on God and better conform me to the image of Jesus Christ?”

To put it as simply as I know how, ***Jesus is calling on us to shift the center of gravity in our lives from a selfish concern for self to an all-consuming passion for him!***

Let’s go back for a minute to the closing statement in Mark’s version of this story. There Jesus says, “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?” He is calling on us to weigh competing values. What is more precious, the wealth, acceptance, praise, and acclaim of this world, or your own soul? And if you sell your soul to gain the world, what will you offer or give to win it back?

To “hate” your soul or your life in this world, therefore, means forsaking selfish preoccupation with your own earthly welfare and fame and redirecting all of your energy to the fame and praise of Jesus. It means you renounce those petty, personal ambitions that are designed only to draw attention to yourself, and use whatever possessions or power or popularity or success you achieve for the glory and praise of Jesus.

There is another example of this perspective on life and death that is found in Revelation 12. Here is how John describes those who suffer and die for their faith in Christ:

“And they have conquered him [i.e., the Devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11).

When he says they “loved not” he means they “hated.” That is, when they compared the value of retaining their life and position on earth, on the one hand, with the value of honoring Jesus and remaining faithful to him, on the other, it looked as if they actually hated themselves. No, not literally. But so great was their love for Jesus that they would rather die and forfeit all earthly pleasure in order that they might honor and magnify Jesus and his beauty and power.

When hating is loving

Here, then, is the great ***paradox*** that I spoke about at the beginning. ***By “hating” your soul or by “hating” your life you are in fact loving it! The greatest act of genuine self-love is self-hatred!*** I probably just lost a lot of you, didn’t I?

Look closely at how Jesus said it in John 12:25. He spoke of hating our life ***“in this world”*** and by doing so keeping it “for eternal life.” Don’t overlook that phrase, “in this world” (v. 25). Jesus isn’t asking you to hate yourself or deny yourself in any ultimate or absolute sense. What you are aiming for is entrance into eternal life. But if you are consumed now, in this world, with promoting your own fame rather than that of Jesus, you lose your very soul for

eternity. If you are committed above all else to preserving your possessions and power and even your earthly existence instead of being willing to give it all up for Jesus, you end up losing what is most important for all eternity.

As most of you know, or should know, I am a *Christian Hedonist*, and I am doing everything I can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to make you one as well! What is a Christian Hedonist? A Christian Hedonist is someone who believes that it is impossible to desire pleasure too much, and that the pleasure we desire is pleasure in God and all that he is for us in Jesus. I'm not advocating the pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself. That is secular hedonism. That is the view and the value system of this fallen world. What I am advocating is that God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. Or again, God is most highly praised by you when you find your greatest and highest pleasure in him.

And many think that what Jesus said in Mark 8 and here in John 12 contradicts that view. After all, how can anyone be committed to the pursuit of pleasure in God if he/she hates their own soul? I'm glad you asked, because I have an answer!

Our Lord's appeal that we deny ourselves and take up our cross and hate our souls in this world is actually grounded upon the concern and love that each person inescapably has for his or her own soul. The only way you can respond appropriately to his call for "self" denial is if you truly care what happens to your "self". Jesus makes this demand on the assumption that we are wholeheartedly committed to the happiness and eternal welfare of our "self." If you lacked concern for the eternal welfare of your soul, you would lose all incentive for obeying Christ's command. If you didn't truly love yourself and care deeply about the eternal welfare of your life, the words of Jesus would make no sense to you; they would lose their appeal.

His exhortation is persuasive because of the intensely passionate concern you have for what might happen if you don't obey. Jesus calls on us to deny ourselves because otherwise we'll die, not just now but for all eternity! We must "lose" our lives if we hope to "save" them. And it is the legitimacy of that personal hope on which Jesus bases his appeal. Clearly, Jesus grounds his exhortation in the inescapable reality of human desire for one's own welfare and happiness and well-being (let us never forget that self-interest is not the same as selfishness). C. S. Lewis explains it this way:

"The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire" (*The Weight of Glory*, 25).

Jesus is simply asking that you sacrifice the lesser blessings of temporal and earthly comforts in order to gain the greater blessings of eternal and unending pleasure. Do what is best for your "self," says Jesus, and deny your "self"! To refuse to follow Jesus is to deny your "self" the greatest imaginable joy. His call is for us to renounce our vain attempt to satisfy our souls through illicit sex and ambition and earthly fortune. Instead, do yourself a favor. Follow Jesus and gain true life, true joy, true pleasure.

In other words, what Jesus is really telling us is how to save our lives, not destroy them. But here is the paradox: *to save them for eternity we must lose them in this world*. So again, to hate your life in this world and to deny yourself now and to take up your cross and follow Jesus means you will do things that the world around you will consider utter foolishness. That was certainly the case in Revelation 12. People watching these martyrs die for their faith would have said: "You guys are nuts! All you have to do to stay alive and thrive and prosper here on earth is deny Jesus. It's such a simple thing." But their response was: "Sure, we could gain life now by denying Jesus. But we would lose it for eternity. And we love our souls and our lives far too much to settle for temporal pleasures in this life when by remaining faithful to Jesus we gain eternal pleasures in the age to come!"

Some may respond to that attitude and say, "Wow, you've made quite a sacrifice to follow Jesus." No, not really. David Livingstone was a pioneer missionary to Africa. On December 4, 1857, he spoke to students at Cambridge University in England. Here is what he said:

"For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. . . . Away with the word [sacrifice] in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather, it is a privilege. Anxiety,

sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us and for us. I never made a sacrifice!” (Cited in Samuel Zwemer, “The Glory of the Impossible,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Ralph Winter and Stephen Hawthorne, eds. [Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981], 259).

This is the same thing Paul was talking about in Philippians 3:7-11.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:7-11).

All those things that Paul “counted as loss,” things like public respect and religious fame and political power and physical comfort, comprised for him a hating of his own soul, a denying of himself, and a taking up of his cross. And to what end? What could he possibly gain by this choice? He says it clearly: “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!” I hate my life in this world and deny myself precisely so that “I may gain Christ and be found in him.”

And what precisely do we gain by losing our life in this world? What is ours if we hate our life and choose instead to serve Christ? We get Christ! “Where I am,” he says, “there will my servant be also.” And not only that, when we cease trying to gain the praise of people and devote ourselves wholly to Jesus, “the Father will honor” us (v. 26). In other words, stop trying to win praise from others. Stop trying to earn their respect or receive their applause. Serve Jesus, follow Jesus, and the Father will honor your socks off!

Let me say one more thing about what it means to hate or deny or to lose your life in this world. It means dropping all pretense about who you really are. Leave your mask at home, folks! Abandon all those complex schemes you’ve created to shield you from the pain others might inflict when you don’t measure up to their expectations.

The person who is devoted to loving and saving his life in this world is the one to whom you can never get close. They always keep you at emotional arm’s length. You never have the opportunity to truly know them and see them. You’re never quite sure that what you see is what’s really there. They project an image that they think will enhance their reputation and esteem in your eyes. They are so determined to love and preserve their life in this world that you never can get close enough to see and know the real person hiding behind that mask.

Why is it important to abandon all schemes at persuading others that you are something you’re not? Because if you don’t you will never be able truly to serve and honor Jesus. You are too consumed with serving and honoring yourself.

That is what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. Yes, it is demanding. It is counter cultural. It is counter intuitive. That’s why Jesus said that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:14). It’s hard to hate your life in this world. But if you truly love your life, if you genuinely want what is best for your soul, hate it, deny it, and in doing so you gain Christ and eternal life.

Conclusion

If you are still struggling to understand what it means to hate your life in this world for the sake of your life in the next, consider what we saw in John 12:1-8. I can’t prove it, but I highly suspect that when Jesus spoke these words in vv. 25-26, he had in mind Mary and what she did for him at that dinner party in the home of Simon.

Without the slightest regard for what others might think of her or say about her, she poured out her affection and worship on Jesus. She didn’t take into consideration the financial cost of her devotion. She was oblivious to the

criticism of others or how she might appear. She refused to think about how her action might affect her reputation or social standing. Her selfless devotion and service are a model to us of what it means to follow Jesus.

There is a real sense in which what Mary did constituted the “hating” of her life in this world. She treated her reputation and her standing among the disciples and her financial security as utterly unimportant when compared with loving and following Jesus. And she did it because she wanted what is ultimately and eternally best for her life in the age to come. I hope and pray that is your desire as well.