

Gaining and Forfeiting – Matthew 16:21-26

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Coming out of sabbatical, I got caught up to some news I somehow missed while I was away. That news included the deaths of two public figures who interested me. The first was the pastor Timothy Keller, the prolific author and founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City due to pancreatic cancer.

I've used many of his writings and curricula throughout my ministry. And that's because while Tim Keller was an unabashed lover of and believer in Jesus, who taught and showed what it means to live convinced—both intellectually and existentially—that the Gospel is true, that Jesus is alive, that sins are forgiven, and that all of this is really good news, he lived these beliefs respectfully and with a humble and sacrificial demeanor. It's what made him so appealing to Christians but also to those who were struggling or curious about faith.

Also, legendary game show host Bob Barker died a couple weeks ago at the age of 99. He was in television for 50 years and most famously hosted *The Price Is Right*. Of course, the *Price is Right* is on in the late weekday mornings. So, as a kid, I could only see it when we were not in school. And my brother and I weren't allowed to watch daytime TV in the summer, so it was a rarity when I could see Bob Barker in action.

I remember he was such a dignified man—always so well-dressed and composed. I really got the sense that all those silly games on that show and the antics the contestants demonstrated were a little beneath him.

But, Barker was such a kind man and really wanted the contestants to be winners in those pricing games.

I saw a video this week of one such game (you can find it on YouTube – search Bob Barker and the 10 chances game). A young woman named Joy is given 10 chances to write down the correct prices of three prizes. And to make it easier, she's given a set up numbers for each prize. All she has to do is put them in the right order.

Well, Joy really struggles to come up with different combinations of numbers without using the same numbers and order of numbers over and over again. And Barker coaches her to the finish line. You can tell he's getting exhausted, especially at the end, when she needs to put the five numbers of a new car in the right order.

"Joy, Joy, you've already used the number one. You can't use it twice," he tells her. And by the time she gets to her last chance, he practically tells her what order to right down the numbers, because it's the last combination she has available and she's not getting it. And when it's revealed that her final guess is correct, Barker is so exhausted and dumbfounded that she actually got it right that he has to sit down on the floor in astonishment and exhaustion.

Two people, Tim Keller and Bob Barker, who in their own unique ways put others first.

It's common when hosting a dinner of some sort to let the guests go through the line first. It happens in people's homes, it happens at school banquets, it happens at church dinners. The cooks, the organizers, the hosts always go last. That's proper etiquette.

That's really not a big deal IF there's no danger of running out of food. When unexpected guests arrive, we hope, wish, pray that there will be enough for everybody.

Nobody wants to be at the back of the line, especially when there's a chance there won't be anything left. Given the choice, we want to go first, to get the full portion, to sit in the most comfortable chair.

Jesus followers, however, know that life is about more than doing what we want. It's about more than going first. In essence, it's about going last.

And it's really hard to go last.

There's a struggle we all endure in our journeys—a struggle between striving for what we believe we are entitled to and sacrificing what we have for others.

An example of this lies in the concept of forgiveness.

"Forgiveness is the heartbeat of salvation history and the virtue that should mark the followers of Jesus. But those who seek to control and

manipulate others can twist even the very heart of the gospel for their perverted ends.” (Wilco Devries, *Christianity Today*, May/June 2023)

There’s the story Devries tells of a young woman who suffered terrible childhood abuse at the hands of family members, including her father. Nobody in her life spoke up or intervened. As an adult, she finally gathered the courage to confront her abusers, who misused Scripture and twisted theology to excuse their actions and demand her silence.

God forgives us by taking on our punishment, they argued, so she should likewise “forgive and forget” and forego reporting their crimes to the police. After initially “forgiving” her offenders, she distanced herself from her family. When she did so, they interpreted her actions as unforgiveness, adding to her moral conflict. Was she right in doing what she did—calling her family to account after being coerced to forgive? Hence, the struggle.

She’s not alone. There are stories like this too frequently about how “forgiveness” has been used to vindicate abusers and silence the abused. Once this coerced forgiveness is offered, it seems impossible to retract, which is often why abusers use forgiveness as a silencing technique.

This is just one example of the struggle we all have inside us—the struggle to put others first (forgive) and to stand up for our own well-being (holding abusers accountable).

Perhaps there’s a solution that incorporates both, a healthy way in which we can protect ourselves and yet also choose to put others first.

We can all imagine times when we wanted to be treated better, when we longed for more care, recognition, and grace than we received from others. We may look back and think, *I wish my failures would be treated with gentleness. I wish I had received support during a hard season. I wish I had received love instead of rejection. I wish that anniversary had been remembered or that milestone had been acknowledged. I wish I would be made to feel needed, included, significant, treasured.* (Jen Wilkin, “Jesus Transforms Our Wishful Thinking, *CT* July/August 2023)

And it’s not bad, it’s not selfish, to desire these things. They reflect our basic human need to be loved, included, known, and accepted. But how we respond to these yearnings shapes the course of our lives.

Jesus strangely gives us an answer that is hard to hear. After telling the disciples that he must suffer and die before being raised up (which Peter, the human that he is, finds absolutely outrageous), he declares that anyone wishing to come after him should deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him.

Now, notice that nowhere there does Jesus imply that his followers should go to the front of the dinner line. Nowhere does denying oneself mean that we should expect to be loved and accepted by those who dislike, despise, or hate us. And nowhere does Jesus reveal that rewards will come from being first. In fact, in Matthew 7, Jesus says, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them."

What does this look like? What does it look like to not focus on what we wish for ourselves but to instead do the same for others?

It doesn't mean sacrificing our well-being (forgiving someone who would only use our forgiveness to hide their wrongs or perpetuate further abuse). It doesn't mean being a doormat and always caving to everyone else's wishes and desires over our own.

It does mean, though, at some meaningful but strange level considering others' interests as better than our own. All with the purpose of gaining something for ourselves that we can never gain when all of our personal wishes for ourselves are met.

You know (because you've experienced this) the peace and fulfillment you find when others come first—for your spouse, your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors. As much as it might grind against your own sense of self, you realize in the aftermath that you've received far more and found a greater sense of meaning when you gave of something you always desire for yourself.

The hardest thing to do is to deny oneself in front of an adversary—somebody who has done you wrong or who you're always at odds with. Because it's with that person especially that we want to win. They've wounded us and we want to get back at them. We want to win and want them to lose. We're entitled to this (or that's what we tell ourselves).

Andy Stanley, the pastor of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, asked this question of his congregation in a sermon he preached a

few weeks ago: Regarding that relationship with that person you're at odds with, what would choosing to lose look like in this situation?

Would you really be losing? If you allowed that other person to win, would you really be losing? Would you really be forfeiting something important? Or would you, in losing, instead be gaining a measure of peace and meaning you would never gain by winning in human terms?

The cross of Jesus is about gaining while forfeiting. It's about winning while losing. Jesus lost—lost his life all for the purpose of gaining the world.

When we take up our own crosses, we're doing the same—losing our lives in order to find life. And while we should never sacrifice our safety or our sense of being whole, choosing to go last and putting others first is really where the big gains are.

Don't mistake my certainty in this theory for how difficult it is to act this out. It's enormously hard. At the cross, however, Jesus proved it possible.