

## "ON FINDING LIFE"

TEXT: "For whosoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught as much in paradox as in parable. Both are devices to make the truth sharp, clear and unforgettable. A parable is a mirror in which we see the reflection of ourselves. A paradox is a riddle - a seeming contradiction in which we see the clash of opposites strike a balance and move to a sharpened point of truth.

The man from Nazareth was a master of sharp epigram and incisive paradox. He could cut through an ambiguous thought with the sharp thrust of a knife. "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" - that's a paradox. "The last shall be first, and the first last". "He that would be greatest, let him be your servant". Jesus taught with sharp truths that stick in the mind.

I suppose his most widely quoted paradox is this one: "Whosoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake....will save it". He is not playing around with an inspirational theory. This is the truth about life. He's talking about what we all want - to find life, to save life. And between these two opposites - self-loving and self-losing - is the conflict that is going on in everyone of us.

### OVERCOMING SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Suppose we consider the text in light of the problem of self-consciousness.

It is said that Billy Sunday, once in preparation for a city-wide mission, wrote the mayor of the city in advance requesting a list of people in the city who were in need of special prayer. The mayor very obligingly sent him the City Directory. Now most of us have a battle with shyness, self-consciousness, timidity. If you happen to be bothered by it, it may help you to remember that more than half of any given population is on your side.

What a nuisance it is - this feeling of timidity, this feeling of inferiority, oversensitivity to criticism, a lurking dread of what other people may say or think which drives us into hiding from them and even from ourselves. The essence of self-consciousness is fear - an extreme awareness of self. You try to make a speech and your self gets in the way, crawls up in your throat, and tenses your muscles. You go out to meet people and a chilling, nervous sensation freezes your responses.

This torment of timidity. Some people have lived so long with it that they have come to accept it as normal. Some have even come to think of it as a mark of modesty. But these exasperating psychologists keep insisting that it's really a symptom of emotional instability, a tell tale signal that we are thinking too much of ourselves.

The Christian insight here is so obviously elementary that it has become the common-sense-ness of mankind. We save ourselves by losing ourselves. We can overcome our self-consciousness in some measure by a kind of flank movement in which we turn attention away from ourselves to something else. "Get lost" is a slang expression with a good deal of psychological fitness in it. If you want to make a speech - get lost, lose yourself in the speech. Don't think of yourself, think of it, or think of them - the peer people who have to listen to it and sit through it. If you want to win friends and influence people - get lost, get yourself off your mind. A person never does so poorly for himself as when he is thinking too much about himself.

Next time you drive your automobile, learn a lesson from it. Directly in front of the driver's seat is a panel of push buttons, instruments and gauges. They're there for a purpose, to keep you informed on what's going on inside the complex machinery: a speedometer to give you speed and mileage, the oil and gasoline gauges to let you know about fuel and lubrication and so on. You had better look at them occasionally. But if out on the road you keep your eyes fixed on them, anxious about the inner works, you're likely to end up in the ditch. We're not made for too much introspection and every basic wisdom about the human soul coincides with the paradox that people whose thoughts are too much on themselves turn wholly inward. Feeling every pulsebeat, analyzing every muscular twitch, and checking every emotional reaction, they are likely to end up with more inner trouble than by their introspection they had attempted to avoid.

#### OVERCOMING SELF-CENTEREDNESS

Suppose we dig deeper into this paradox and its promise of deliverance, not alone from self-consciousness, but from the deeper moral problem of self-centeredness. It is the clear Christian conviction that self-centeredness is the essence of man's sin. The root sin, the great grand-daddy of all sin - "original sin", if you like it - is this biological inclination to put ourselves at the center of life and make everything else revolve around us. We are born self-centered. As infants we are the center of the only interest we have. Everything exists for us. Then we carry that into adulthood and fill the world with its consequences: an insidious self-centeredness that corrupts everything we do, as individuals and groups, nations, races, classes. The New Testament speaks of the death of self, the denial of self, the losing of self to find life. And this paradox is called salvation - deliverance from self-centeredness.

The central problem of every man's life has always been his battle with himself, how to get himself out of the center and put something else there. "I" trouble, someone has called it - capital "I". Big "I" and little "u". Here's a little jingle that sums it all up:

"I do not mind my "p's" and "q's" how careless I must be.  
Nor do my actions always suit my neighbors to a "t"  
I think perhaps my greatest fault that I can now recall -  
I make my "I's" a lot too large and all my "u's" too small".

The trouble is we have put ourselves where God should be and the sin of all sins is making ourselves God. The world today is in deep trouble because of this - men putting themselves in the center, exalting themselves as God. The noise we are hearing in the world now - the cries of race and clan - everyone shouting "I", "Me" and "Mine". How do we get peace in a world like that. How do we save ourselves from the sickness of self-centeredness? The answer is we don't. We cannot save ourselves, and that's the weakness of many of the proposed cures. They turn inward for the answers - self-knowledge, self-discovery, self-expression.

The late Arthur Brisbane, just before he died, made this pronouncement:

"The psychology of modern times has turned man's mind too much in upon himself. Based on the old Greek admonition, 'Know Thyself', it has encouraged and overemphasized the introspective, know yourself, discover yourself. But men have never done that. They come into the world weeping and go out of it wondering...and never seem to fathom the depths of the self. Perhaps it is no part

of the Divine plan to have men fully know themselves. That knowledge would make them lose interest in their work, the more important creative work which they were put here to do. A far healthier approach than know thyself is the Christian one: give thyself, deny thyself, lose thyself.

This, I feel, is the wisdom we have forgotten. This is the word we need to hear. We find our true selves only when we get them out of dead center and put God there; when we move from a self-centered life to a God centered life. We think of John Wesley who for so long a time did his best to save himself. And then came that unforgettable night in May in 1738 in the chapel on Aldersgate Street when he saw that his best hope was to "let go" and "let God" - to forget himself and put his trust in the mercy and saving grace of God.

#### DELIVERANCE FROM SELF-PRESERVATION

Finally, move into the deepest place in the paradox: deliverance from self-preservation. There's an old saying that goes: "Self preservation is nature's first law". Is it? Is it true that the first law of nature is to protect ourselves and save ourselves? It is, if we remember it's a paradox. "He that loseth his life shall keep it".

To keep life, to really preserve life, we must be willing to lose it - to spend it, to give it away. On the surface, this may appear to be a contradiction. Yet few principles have been so convincingly demonstrated in human experience. We have to live by the law of expenditure; everything does. We can't hoard life. We can't say to our memory, "Look memory, I will need you in my old age, so I won't use you now. I'll spare you". Or muscles - if we don't use our muscles this year, we won't have them next year. This, too, is nature's law. We lose what we do not use. How many fine things do we lose by our overcautious efforts to save them, protect them, and preserve them? You have to spend yourself to keep it - lose yourself, give yourself away.

Some years ago one of our best-known clinical psychologists, who had ignored religion for years, found himself coming back to it by the rediscovery of the paradox that what Jesus said about finding life by giving it was what he had been saying to his patients for years. He said he had learned in his own professional practice that the self-sparing life is self-defeating, and that when people try to protect themselves by withdrawing from the risks and hurts and demands of life they invariably diminish the self they are trying to protect. He told of a young woman who came to him asking help in the simple matter of making friends. She complained that her circle of friendship was shrinking into a narrow world of loneliness. Probing back into the pattern of her life he discovered that growing up in a comfortable home she had never put herself out to mingle with people unless she got enjoyment out of their company. She had habitually avoided doing anything she disliked. She had joined no church, no community enterprise, nothing that involved responsibility. She didn't want that. When company came to her home - that is, people who didn't appeal to her - she simply kept in her room. And so it happened that, not willing to put herself out for others, she found herself gradually left out by others. How often loneliness is self-inflicted. Not always to be sure, health factors and the aging process enter in - but people who by choice live to themselves are invariably left to themselves with nothing in their world but themselves.

Nothing is as sure or true as this paradox that the selfish man is the shrinking man; his world grows smaller and smaller until he abides all alone. The giving man is the living man; his world grows larger with his touch and everything multiplies in his hand. The same holds true for a church. The church which seeks to save its life by harboring its resources in plant, program and personnel will end up losing its life, dying a slow death. The church, on the other hand, which is willing to open wide its doors to all and minister in the name of Christ to all - to lose its life for Christ's sake will find it. The preserve life, we need to share it.

During the last war a young woman who lived with her doctor husband in India one day saw him die from a sudden illness. The shock of it was so great that she lost all interest in life and didn't care whether she lived or died. On shipboard coming back to America there was a little seven year old boy whose missionary parents had been killed in Burma. "You and I" he said to her "are the only Americans on this ship". Plainly, he wanted to be good friends, but she carefully avoided him. She couldn't forget her sorrow even enough to be friendly to a lonely little boy. But when the ship was torpedoed and sinking in the night, she resisted the impulse to go down into forgetfulness with it when she saw the boy shivering like a terrified little bird. "He came to me" she said, "and clung close. He needed me". Through several days adrift in the South Atlantic, they pulled each other through. All her friends said it would be difficult to say which had saved which: whether it was the woman who saved the child or the child who saved the woman. For it is one of the miracles of living that when we save another, we thereby save ourselves.

"Seldom can the heart be lonely,  
If it seeks a loneliner still;  
Self-forgetting, seeking only  
Emptier cups of love to fill."

Jesus summed it all up in this paradox of few words: "He who would save his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake....shall find it".

LET US PRAY      Help us, O God, in our lives to strike the balance between self-loving and self-losing. Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret his words to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to his words in which we find Thy Word that will speak to our condition. We ask this in his spirit. Amen