



CROSSING FAITH

Why the Biggest Loser Wins

Text: Mark 8:31-38; Mark 10:17-27

I

In our scripture lesson today, we meet a man who, I think, is a lot like many of us who fill churches or listen to religious broadcasts today. For one thing, he has clearly been through that part of the spiritual journey that we've been calling DISCOVERING FAITH. He's not only woken up to the reality of a God in the universe, but to the belief that Jesus can lead him into a deeper encounter with this God. Mark 10:17 says that ¹⁷ **As Jesus started on his way, [this] man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him.** Talk about someone on an "intentional journey." Here is a person who is willing to literally put on his running shoes to follow Jesus. He is willing to humble himself and fall on his knees before Jesus, hoping to find the riches of the spiritual life.

It turns out, however, that this man has actually moved even further on the spiritual journey than just discovering. He's already spent considerable time in what we've been calling the NURTURING FAITH season of life. When Jesus says: ¹⁹ **You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother,'"** it is clear that this guy knows these commandments cold. He's apparently gone to the worship services and the Bible studies. He's memorized the scriptures and practiced the prayers. He's got the core beliefs, disciplines, and group commitments down.

And it's not just head-knowledge for him. ²⁰ **"Teacher," he declared, "all these [commandments] I have kept since I was a boy."** Jesus, I've refrained from killing my kids or stepping out on my wife, even when I felt like it. I'm not ripping anybody off or lying and gossiping like some other people do. I'm honest in my business dealings. I've taken good care of mom and dad. In other words, this young man has progressed to what we've been calling the ACTING FAITH stage of life too.

What we have here is a picture of somebody who had the basic "DNA" of the spiritual life pretty much working. He was Discovering, Nurturing, and Acting his faith out in an ongoing way. But something was still missing. Maybe he'd moved into that QUESTIONING FAITH stage that Mike Murphy described so well for us last week. Perhaps he was going through all the right religious motions but found that some things still weren't working out at all like he'd planned. Maybe he'd found that being faithful didn't protect him or the people he loved from agonizing pains and losses. Maybe he cried out for answers and the answers didn't come. Perhaps he was actually close to giving up on this whole spiritual journey thing because it just didn't seem to deliver the results he'd hope for. And so, with one last surge of faith he runs up to Jesus and asks the big question: How do I break through this wall I'm stuck against? How do I cross over into that deeper, greater, everlasting kind of life I've always been told that spirituality will lead me to: ¹⁷ **"Good teacher," he asked, "what MUST I DO to inherit eternal life?"**



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And the Bible says that ²¹ **Jesus looked at him and loved him.** I want you to remember those words, because what Christ goes on to say is so very challenging. Jesus says: ²¹ **"One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** ²² **At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.** ²³ **Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"** ²⁴ **The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!** ²⁵ **It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."**

II

I want to talk frankly with you today about the hardest place in your spiritual journey and mine. It's the place where many of us get stuck in a form of spirituality that doesn't really satisfy or transform us, and where a lot of people start to go away from Jesus or church sad, disappointed, or jaded. I think I entered that period of the spiritual journey myself about ten years ago now. I had been pastor of this church for a couple of years, trying to enact a bunch of ambitious plans for serving God. I helped draft a poorly-conceived building expansion proposal that nearly split the church before we pulled the plug. I then presided over a considerable mushrooming in our church's program and budget, when all of a sudden there was a dip in the economy that left us with a huge financial shortfall.

We laid off several staff and that in turn precipitated a terrible round of conflict within the membership and remaining staff over the whole philosophy and direction of the church. Anonymous letters started circulating, asserting that I was a liar or fool, that some of the staff were heretics, and that this once great Church was now going down the rathole. Long-time members were leaving the church in droves.

It wasn't any better at home either. Tensions in our family were not pretty, our personal finances were ugly, and the baby-faced guy I met in the mirror when I came from California to Chicago was now looking older than his father. It was all I could do to drag myself out of bed in the morning and snow-blow the driveway-from-Hades for the umpteenth time. I'd scratch my way through the day and spend the night tossing and turning in worry.

I had consistent fantasies of moving someplace where it wasn't winter for nine months and of getting a job where no one expected me to have a leadership opinion. In my worst moments, my prayers amounted to this: "In spite of all I've tried to discover of you God and all I've invested in nurturing faith... in spite of all I've done to act for you and all the questions I've asked you to answer for me God, faith is failing me. It isn't



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protecting me. It isn't feeding me. It isn't advancing any of my good plans. So how do I get through this wall? Whatever happened to all those promises of the abundant and eternal life?

And to my surprise, this is the message I began to hear in various ways from God. Part of the surprise came from how hard the message was to hear and part came from the unmistakable love with which Jesus spoke: "I know you're running hard, Dan. I know you've told yourself and others for many years that your spiritual journey has been all for them and Me. But this spiritual journey you've been on has mostly been about YOU, hasn't it? It's been about what your mind could discover, what your spirit could nurture, what your talent could achieve. It's about all the ways that I could bless you, the way your life could get richer."

And I had to admit that God was right. Winding through all my discovering and nurturing, my acting and questioning was this vascular system of selfishness. It permeated everything about me. It affected every relationship. "What must I do, God, to really inherit the life you want me to live," I asked. "One thing you lack," he said, "a willingness to become smaller, so that I in you might become bigger." "How?" I asked.

"I want you to rejoice in the opportunity that every failure and every conflict provides you to examine your real motivations and seek mine instead. I want you to start treating every loss and disappointment, every decay of your own strength as an invitation to put greater trust in Me, because one day you won't have this job; you won't have even that gray-haired old body; you'll only have Me. I want you to treat every criticism and each rejection as an opportunity to identify with Me, who took the place of a servant. I want you to go, sell, shed, *crucify* all the pride and fakery and vain compulsivity you are so accustomed to using to secure and advance YOURself. Redirect your resources toward really surrendering to me, toward truly living for my kingdom's purposes; and, I promise, you'll find treasure there; you'll be given more of MYself to live in you there. And then you'll be amazed at how a new season opens up where you will understand at a whole new level what it means to **come follow me.**"

III

It has been a few years now since I first heard that call so plainly. I'm still painfully aware that I am only beginning this season of the spiritual journey, this stage of faith that some refer to as "the eye of the needle," and we've termed the season of CROSSING FAITH. In Mark chapter 8:34 we read: ³⁴**Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself [daily] and take up his cross and follow me.** ³⁵ **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.**



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In one sense, the time of CROSSING is a bit like the sweep second hand on the clock. It can come to us at any time on the spiritual journey and typically sweeps over us many, many times. For many people, however, the spiritual breakthrough seems to come toward the end of the most difficult period of QUESTIONING FAITH. You realize, as I started to several years ago, that part of the reason you've been questioning God is because you've been living with the assumption that God and religion are supposed to make ME bigger, happier, more blissful. But the proper prayer is the one that John the Baptizer models: "Lord, **[you] must become greater; [and] I must become less**" (John 3:30).

What still needs to become less in you and me, so that we can cross through the eye of the needle and into the even more treasured seasons of faith that lie beyond? God will give you the answer if you ask. What do I cling tightly to, because I still think it constitutes my real wealth? Is it being right in that argument? Is it being recognized for how smart you are, for how hard you work, for how good you are? Is your wealth all that nice stuff you have or want to have? Is it having the answers, the achieving child, the perfect family? Is it looking great?

The saddest thing in the world is someone who clings to this world's concept of wealth and, in so doing, misses the treasure of heaven. "Whatever it is that keeps you focused on YOU instead of on ME and the life of MY kingdom, says Jesus, rejoice in every circumstance and every opportunity life gives you to crucify the old self. Sell it, to give it away to people who might actually need it. For then you'll actually be able to come, follow me."

Please pray with me...

Lord Jesus, how hard it is to enter your kingdom. I am just beginning to see what a bloated camel I am, how regularly I cling to false wealth and forsake your true treasure. Sometimes I think there's no hope that I'll ever be saved from this condition. But you have said that all things are possible with you, God. So, even if the process is long and painful, I ask you to bleed me of my selfishness, and fill me with YOUR self. Draw me into that season of faith and life whose supreme glory is the chance -- more deeply and completely -- to know and be used of YOU. Do likewise, we pray, with all who join in this prayer. Remind us all daily by Christ's example, that it is indeed the biggest loser of this world's weight who ultimately wins, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.