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Learning to Lose

Philippians 3:7

One of the greatest lessons we can learn as human beings is how to give up what we do not need. Paul described how this process was unfolding in his life in the third chapter of Philippians. There he pointed out that all the things he relied on for his former sense of confidence and identity he had come to regard as loss. These include his ethnic identity as a Jew, of which circumcision was a sign, his knowledge of the law, his education to be a religious leader, his religious piety, and his reputation for competence which was demonstrated so well in his persecution of Christians. All of these characteristics which were central to his identity had been pushed to the periphery or discarded from his life. Once Christ had become the center of his life everything else became secondary. Paul summed up what was happening to him in these words, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." His journey with Christ was teaching him to lose that which was no longer essential.

When John Calvin wrote about this chapter of Philippians he compared Paul's loss with that of sailors on the verge of a shipwreck. Calvin wrote, "They throw everything overboard, that the ship being lightened, they may reach the harbor in safety." Paul was learning to discard the values and priorities which prevented him from placing his hope in Christ. He has come to the realization that Christ is the one who brings us safely through the storms of our lives.

Hans Mol has described how he learned this truth. He was 21 years old when the Gestapo arrested him in 1943. He had grown up in a small Dutch village where he occasionally played the organ in the church. The minister that served the church was well educated and an effective preacher. But Hans never paid much attention. What was said from the pulpit went in one ear and out the other. He went to church for the music, but his view of life was based on the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre which he had studied in school.

That philosophy did not equip him to deal with the immense suffering he encountered in the Gestapo camps and prisons. He soon realized that physical survival was not his only challenge. He also needed the inner resiliency to cope with the hopelessness of his situation. It was then that the preaching he remembered from his childhood began to resonate for him. He came to see that Christ was the key to coping with the tragic circumstances that confronted him. Faith in Christ made it possible for him to see himself in the larger context of a world weighed down by sin as it struggled to be whole. The sermons from his childhood spoke to his desperate situation far better than the philosophy of Sartre.

The two years that Hans Mol spent in prison became a time to throw overboard everything that was not essential. He looks back on those times in these words:

In the Gestapo camp and in the prisons there was nothing from the past that I could rely on for security. The comfort of music, friends, relatives, status as a university student, capacity for reasoning, logical competence, confidence in man-made truth, all vanished as anchors for one's self-respect...Unexpectedly and miraculously in that situation of rejection and despair, affinity with, understanding of, and faith in the

crucified Christ did well up as a deep surge of inner power, as an inner spring of living water...the old life (one's previous emotional attachments) had to become obsolete, decrepit, and threadbare before the new one could be grafted on (*Calvin for the 3rd Millennium*, pages 2-3).

John wrote his gospel to prepare his readers to make this kind of journey with Christ. In the 12th chapter Jesus arrives in Bethany at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. During a previous visit Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. The celebration of that event was cut short when word came that news of the miracle had not been well received in Jerusalem. The authorities decided that Jesus was a threat they could no longer tolerate. They were now openly plotting against Jesus' life. Jesus and the disciples had fled for safety to a town on the edge of the wilderness.

But now it was time for the celebration of the Passover and Jesus comes out of hiding and returns to Bethany. He wants to be with these friends one more time. At dinner Jesus is seated with Lazarus and Judas at the table. Martha is busy serving the meal. Suddenly Mary bolts into the room carrying a jar of expensive ointment. Without asking anyone's permission, she begins anointing Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. The room is filled with the fragrance of this expensive ointment.

Everyone in the room is shocked. It was very bad form for a woman to give such an expensive gift to a man to whom she was not betrothed. It was inappropriate for a man to accept such a gift under these circumstances. This is the sort of thing that could cause a major scandal. There was a real question in the minds of everyone present whether Jesus could or should accept such a gift.

But Jesus sees something in this event that no one else sees. His eyes are on the cross. From Bethany he will begin his final journey. He also knows that Mary has discarded social convention and her unblemished reputation for a reason. She understands that Jesus went into their family tomb not just to save Lazarus, but also to set her free. Like the Apostle Paul she is ready to throw everything else overboard so that she can go with Jesus on his journey to the cross.

This is a profound act of worship which demonstrates that Mary belongs to Jesus. John's gospel invites us to see in Mary how to give up what we do not need in exchange for the life we have in Christ.