

THE JESUS GAME

Luke 6: 27-38

Sunday, April 25, 2010

You know the excitement of getting a brand new machine with more features and buttons than the salesperson could show you at the store. For this one it's a new computer or a game box or a car, for that one a sewing machine or a kitchen gadget. The excitement of opening the thing up is cooled by the difficulties of actually learning to use it, but the fact that there is more power designed in here than you can grasp in an evening motivates you on the learning curve. You've been there?

Well, here's a peculiar thing. You are already in possession of the most extraordinary, complex, and powerful device in the universe. You have just heard what it can do. It can love your enemy. It can bless those who curse you. It can give freely to anyone who begs for anything, with no expectation of return of any kind. It can forgive, always. It can be merciful, like God is merciful. It can know blessing, no matter what ordeals may come. What a machine! Are you excited?

Perhaps not. After all, you've had yours for a few years now and you have mastered all the full-power functions. No one pushes your buttons anymore, right? You've got this thing down. Your soul is in control. You're glad Jesus sent you the instructions with the package, but that teacher-pupil thing with him is over, right? I mean, hey! once every trace of resentment and judgment and self-defense is gone, who needs the tutorial? We want something new to work on—an iPad, maybe.

There is something puzzling in the way we love and admire Jesus—more like Superman for saving Gotham than like the floor model for the human machine. Jesus says *You are like gods* and *Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect*—but we aren't aching to take this thing out on the road to see what it can do. Oh—with what we call our pleasures, sure, we'd like to press all the buttons at once and deal with the consequences later. But learning how to carry pain in peace? Discovering how to do good to those who hate you? How to be hungry, how to be rich or poor, how to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger"? (James 1:20) No, oddly enough, if Jesus is God's demo for how to be human, we aren't buying.

Maybe that's because, for a long time, churches in the West have taught a different idea of Jesus, namely, that God made Jesus suffer in our place, so we would believe that God doesn't really mind if we keep using this extraordinary machine on the ordinary settings—grumpy, ungrateful, self-absorbed. That's the old message of ordinary church. It's in the hymnals! In the Presbyterian tradition, it's the preacher's job to choose the hymns. I can't count the empty-handed hours I have spent looking for the few hymns that prompt us to *practice* Jesus more than praise him. The old church is still marinating in the message that we've got nothing to do but thank God we're saved—even though that's not what the gospel says. You heard the good news: Love your enemies. Do not judge. Forgive. The old message is a half truth, and a half truth uncorrected is the same as a lie. Of all the lies the church has told, this is the most tragic, for it excuses every other sin.

The "new atheists" like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins have a solution. They hope that all people will soon abandon religion, for religion, they argue, is what is causing people to fail to be loving. With pedophile priests and hate-mongering preachers sucking the airwaves, you can see why their argument is popular. Let's consider their solution more closely. Harris thinks that moral concern for others can always be arrived at by reasoning it through in three steps: 1) Since I see that I think I am absolutely important, 2) I realize everyone thinks likewise about themselves; 3) therefore, reason tells me to treat everyone as absolutely valuable. In his own words: "How can we encourage [people] to extend their moral sympathies beyond a narrow locus? We can be reasonable. Reason is nothing less than the guardian of love."¹

Oh Sam! We get it that we must get away from unreasonable religion obsessing over depravity and offering guilty worship to the Savior. But fleeing from the extreme of self-hatred to the extreme of self-righteous reason will bring no peace. Reason cannot stand outside itself, cannot see itself being unreasonable. It is always at risk of playing a power game and calling it love while shouting all the louder. Reinhold Niebuhr put the problem this way:

*"The careful [i.e., reasonable] definition of rights . . . always develops into injustice because every person views rights not from an absolute but from a biased perspective. The perspective of the strong dictates the conceptions of justice by which the community operates, necessitating social conflict through the assertion of the rights of the weak [to correct] injustice."*²

What a struggle! The Western churches' old song makes us out to be the wholly passive recipients of God's grace—or not; our own will was useless, or evil. The modern story, at least since Nietzsche, blew grace from the table. Father God was dead and gone. All we children had and all we needed was our will and our wits—our reason. What we got from will gone wild was Hitler in Germany, once the heart of reason; Stalin and Mao in the East; and here in the wild West, Wall Street and economic and ecological distortions of the will which only disasters seem to tame. Solution? *Give me the old-time religion*, cries the right, unforgivably ignoring Jim Crow and uncountable violence. *More science, more data, more reason*, cries the left, forgetting how we got here. Is it our will or God's grace will save us—grace or will? Or is the question itself part of the problem? Let's be suspicious of questions that reinforce strife and fear and the feeling that we are all spiraling downward. What is possible? That is always the better question.

Do you like games? I propose that the best way for a Christian to deal with the tension between our will and God's grace is not to sit in the bleachers booing the contestants, but to come down on the field and play the game. Let's call it the Jesus game. Lighten up. See the possibilities.

What makes a game a game? Games all have three features: 1) For the sake of pleasure, you 2) voluntarily choose to 3) to follow odd rules. Remove any one of the elements from play and you will not have a good game. Pleasure is the point, play must be voluntary, and the rules are . . . strange. In the Jesus game, these all apply to the maximum degree. Consider the will, You know you have to take part voluntarily. Just ask teenagers who feel they are forced into church whether they think this is a good game. Or Sam Harris, one of those pressed-into-service teens who never came back.

Now consider the element of pleasure in a game. Following the rules of a game is pleasurable for a simple reason: odd rules demand sharpened awareness, and this human machine is built for exactly that—intention and alertness to what is really going on. Take away awareness—we often do—and we are just like the animals; but heightened awareness is the highest pleasure. Following the odd rules of a game requires your mind to be "on." Breaking a rule in a game is usually the result of losing your attention for a moment.

The Jesus game is the most intense form of pleasure known to our species because it actually makes use of the highest awareness functions we have—the love-your-enemy engine, the power for peace-yet-not-like-the-world-gives. And when we're tired and we're weak and we're worn, the odd rules guide us not downward into ourselves but higher, to the grace of God, for wisdom and strength. We are called to play, not fight, with will *and* grace.

Now consider the rules of the Jesus game. Isn't it for fear of rules that so many avoid the church? Sure. But church rules aren't the rules of the Jesus game. The Jesus game has to do with learning how to love like Jesus. Rules about anything besides Jesus' love come from a different game book. Who says you have to play those games? To love like Jesus means to choose (that's the voluntary element) to put your attention wherever it is needed, regardless the cost (those are the odd rules) whenever you become aware (that's the high pleasure) that your attention will help another. Another person. Another step in

your soul's growth. Another animal. Another threatened wilderness. An Other. That is the Jesus game. It is not the way people in the world generally play. It's a different field. It requires maximum attention. It brings maximum pleasure.

It is a simple fact that every Christian breaks the rules a lot, but as with any game, if you are a serious player, you want to know when you have broken the rule; you want a consequence for your lack of attention. That basketball thing, where the player who fouls raises her hand on the spot, always reminds me of this part of the Jesus game. That is the spirit that belongs in the Jesus game. In contrast to bare reason, someone *does* stand outside you in the Jesus game and can see you when you are unreasonable and call you out. In the Jesus game, you know your ability to play is a pure gift of God. And knowing the rules, you also know the Ruler, and you know you will not be thrown out of the game for breaking the rules. You just want your fellow players' help to show you what to do, and to get back in the game, to keep practicing love.

It is a weird game. The world does not understand why you would want to play, because the world is satisfied with lower forms of attention and pleasures that do not last. The sad fact is, however, that an awful lot of church people don't look as if they're in this game for the pleasure. Maybe no one ever told them what it is for. They don't look forward to practice. Maybe they don't have a coach. They don't want to know when they've fouled. Maybe they're still afraid of being thrown out. And they seem to think the game is about getting to the end of it, or even winning it. Maybe they still don't know that it's Jesus' game. Maybe they haven't read the rules, though they're in the book.

One of the new hymns we've introduced lately says ". . . when sensing beauty or in love's embrace, whether we suffer or sing rejoicing—we are the Lord's." That's it. On Jesus' court, playing Jesus' game. Always. We don't have to worry whether we play the game well; that's for Another to judge. It's just the only game worth playing all the time. Just do it.

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1. *End of Faith*, p. 190
2. Reinhold Niebuhr. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 32