

When You Just Can't Win
Matthew 11:16-30

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03 July 2011

I can sympathize with the Jesus that Matthew tells us about in Chapter 11 of his gospel. Jesus' disciples have been sent out into various towns in Judea and Galilee to proclaim God's kingdom among the Jews. Some of them have returned or sent word to Jesus that they are not having a lot of luck – the good news is not being well received. Even John the Baptist, who is in prison, has sent a messenger to Jesus to ask whether Jesus was *really* the Messiah or if they should be looking for someone else (11:2-3). Wow. Even John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the one who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord is not sure if Jesus is who he thought. It must have been a tough time to be the Son of God.

We can sympathize with Jesus here because he is in a situation we have all been in. He has a mission, a job to do and despite his best efforts so far, he has met with resistance and even outright hostility. It offers me some comfort to know that even Jesus gets frustrated. He cries out against the towns and people who have rejected him. Listen to the way Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message: Jesus says, "This generation is like spoiled children whining to their parents, 'We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.' John the Baptist came fasting, and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff."

"Sometimes you just can't win!" Have you ever heard that from someone? Or ever felt that yourself? You work hard to please your boss only to anger another co-worker. You carefully protect your children only to hear that you should expose them to more risk. Or you give your children freedom and later wish that you had sheltered them a little bit more. You work and save but still can't find the sense of security you are reaching for. You give of yourself for a friend or relative and learn that they speak harsh words behind your back. Sometimes, it seems, you just can't win.

We witness it on a communal level, too. I can think of many people who come to the church office seeking financial assistance. The barriers and hurdles they have to overcome seem huge, even impossible. They manage to pay the rent only by neglecting the electric bill. They finally get a job and then the child support stops coming. Sometimes you just can't win.

We watch the news and we see leaders taking it hard from both sides. If you voted to increase taxes, we will never let you forget it. And if you had to cut services, we won't let you forget that, either. One President enters into a conflict and he is called a hawk or reckless or war-hungry. Another pulls back on troops and he is denounced as too soft or reckless or naïve. One week approval ratings go up. The next they plummet again. Sometimes you just can't win.

We can sympathize with Jesus in his “just can’t win” moment, and we receive comfort in knowing that he sympathizes with us in ours. It is one of the great gifts of the incarnation. But we also learn something from Jesus because he does not respond the way often do in moments of frustration and disappointment. I would venture that most of react one of two ways when things are not going the way we hope and expect; either we direct our feeling at the other (anger) or we direct our feelings inwardly (depression). Jesus, though, responds differently.

Just after chastising Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum for their failure to repent, Jesus breaks out into prayer. Prayer. Jesus doesn’t pray in anger for God’s condemnation to come down upon these places. Neither does he bemoan his own failure as the Messiah. Instead, Jesus begins his prayer with four simple words: “Father, I praise you.” Father, I praise you. In the middle of frustration and disappointment and “sometimes you just can’t win” – Father, I praise you.

What a place to start. To praise God is to acknowledge God for just who God is. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth. He is the one who can command the seas and they obey. God is the gracious Father who gives life. His wisdom is unsearchable and his steadfast love never ends. What a place to start. These four simple words move me so deeply because in my own moments of frustration and disappointment they are just so hard to utter. In fact, they may not even enter my mind. In moments when the frustrations, disappointment, and conflicts in life seem to be the only thing in view, the prayer, "Father, I praise you" is a reminder that whatever challenge I face is not the biggest thing out there.

So I offer you this small challenge in the weeks ahead. When you encounter some conflict, some situation where you just can’t win take a moment to pause in prayer and simply remember who God is. Do not ask him for anything. Do not even ask how to resolve the challenge in front of you. Simply say, “Father, I praise you” and pause long enough to remember a few reasons why.

The next thing that Jesus does in his prayer is to acknowledge that God’s ways are different than the world’s ways. Jesus prays, “You have concealed your ways from the sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people” (v.25, *The Message*). Those who we usually think of as wise or well-educated or important are not necessarily the people who have the best understanding of God’s wisdom. To acknowledge that God’s ways are not the world’s ways is to acknowledge that conventional wisdom may not be the gospel answer to whatever conflict you are facing. If you seek answers or solutions, look instead to the weak and vulnerable and young. They have a special understanding of God’s ways.

Finally, Jesus accepts God’s will and changes his demeanor. “Yes, Father, for such is your gracious will” are the concluding words of Jesus prayer. The message is clear. Sometimes you just can’t win. And the sooner we recognize that truth, the sooner we can embrace the deeper reality that God already knows us more fully than we would like to admit, and still calls us "beloved." The devotional writer Henri Nouwen once said, "When you are able to create a lonely place in the midst of your actions and concerns, then somehow, slowly, your successes and failures lose their power over you." The truth is that you and I, we are not God, and we don't have to try to be.¹

¹ Rev. Canon Charles K. Robertson. *Never Enough!* <http://day1.org/3037-never_enough>

After Jesus prays that prayer of praise, acknowledgement, and acceptance he changes his demeanor – but not his message. He continues the work for which the Father sent him, but he does it with a new tone. He is not governed by frustration or disappointment. His words are gentle and some of the most beloved in the Scriptures:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

We may not soon find resolution to all of our personal and social conflicts. We may not achieve all we set out to do. Even as we strive to walk the Jesus’ way, we may find times when the deck is stacked against us, when nothing we do is enough, when we just cannot win. But Jesus invites us to learn from him, and Jesus himself offers us a model for responding to those moments. First of all prayer. Prayer that includes praising God for who God is. Prayer that recognizes that God often works in humble and surprising ways. And prayer that accepts God’s will even when it is confusing or difficult to discern.

But Jesus is more than just a teacher, and he offers us more than a model; Jesus offers us rest for our very souls - our frustrated, disappointed, conflicted souls. There will be times when you just can’t win. But it is in those moments when you are nearest to the heart of God who continually works to bind up all the broken places in the world and bring all people to himself. Know that, though there are times when you just can't win, the God whom we worship will finally win in his quest to complete the redemption of the world. As you go about the work that is before you, whatever that work might be, whether you are met with great success or frustration and disappointment, do your work resting in the One who will never rest from his labor of love. Amen.