

You Can't Steal What Has Been Given To You

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] The other night on the CBC, at that afternoon show, which you listen to as you travel homeward, there was a wonderful debate between two people, which I've been thinking about ever since in various ways.

Not because I want to resolve their debate, but because it was a fascinating problem that they presented. And one of them was a representative of Greenpeace and was clearly against any form of clear-cut logging.

Now, you have seen the horrific pictures of clear-cut logging, and anybody in their right mind, of course, would be against it, I'm sure. But then there was a forestry company consultant who was arguing that clear-cut logging in a certain way, and at certain times, and in certain ways, is the best way of doing forestry.

And so the two of them went at it. And they made a very strong appeal to data that had been collected to demonstrate the proof of what they said, so that they both made this strong appeal to science.

Now, you see, what it ended up with was this, that having both brought out an enormous amount of statistics to prove their point of view, the one accused the other of being in the pay of the forestry company and using scientific fact simply to bolster what they wanted to bolster.

[1 : 5 0] In other words, to manufacture the truth, which they found congenial. The interesting thing was that the forestry consultant had, in an earlier life, been a founder of Greenpeace.

And one of the founders of it. And he said, well, you know perfectly well that Greenpeace can only put the forestry problem in front of people by showing them pictures of clear-cut logging, because that has guts, you know, just like baby seals have guts.

People can immediately respond to that and say, this must be wrong. And he said, if you didn't have that, you wouldn't get any money, because you've got to appeal to the public who don't know what's happening in the forest anyway.

So, the two of them really just about annihilated each other. And fortunately, the moderator was able to say, it's time for the news.

And so they both had to say goodbye. Now, the thing I really liked about that argument was that it demonstrates the condition in which our world works, where the confrontation takes place in there.

[3 : 1 9] This was a thoroughly scientific, well-argued, thoughtful, knowledgeable person. Here was a scientific, capable arguer and a thoughtful person, again, with enormous statistical backing.

And the two of them could not come to an agreement, except to say that you are motivated by subjective reasons, which discount your argument completely.

And that's what happened. Now, the reason I liked it is because the thing they lacked in that was the possibility that with this professional view over here, and this professional view over here, somewhere there needed to be truth, to which they could both bow down.

But there is no possibility, had they argued till midnight, that they would ever have come to a place where they would acknowledge that. Now, I tell you that because I was reading in an article recently about Michael Novak, who I understand is a journalist in Washington, and who just received the Templeton Prize, and in his address at which he received it, he talked about truth.

And he said that one of the things this past century can demonstrate to us is that there has got to be a commitment to truth.

[4 : 5 5] He describes our century as having been filled with massive ideologies, you know, the Nazi ideology or the Marxist ideology, or there's more congenial ones than that that we like better, but these ideologies have characterized the whole of our century.

And that he quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn in saying, the thing that you have to hold on to is truth, because truth ultimately will bring every ideology crashing to the ground.

So there's this strong belief in truth, and that the idea that there is such a thing as truth never came out in this argument. It just, it was impossible to.

And what has happened, you see, is that there is no truth except what I choose to believe, or what you choose to believe. But Solzhenitsyn says there is truth, and we have to tenaciously hold on to it.

Now, the reason I tell you this is the passage we're looking at from John 15 today has to do with Jesus when he says that a good man would lay down his life for his friends.

[6 : 27] And then he says, you are my friends. And because you are my friends, you will do what I command.

Now, what I take this to mean is this, that when Solzhenitsyn talks about truth, he says even under torture, even when you are reduced to a vegetable, there are certain people in our century who have been able to demonstrate that you can hold on to the truth.

And that though the argument may be, what does it matter whether you say yes or whether you say no? Michael Novak says it matters.

It's of infinite value that you be able to do that. It's terribly important that there is such a thing as truth. But where does it come from?

You know, and I know, I mean, because I've lived with my nose rubbed in it the whole of my life that religion does not lead you to the truth.

[7 : 51] I came up Oak Street today and was confronted by a sign which said, discover your inner potential.

And I am certain that in a large percentage of cases, such a discovery would be tragic.

If that's all there is, let's get it over with you. Now, what Jesus says, and the fulcrum that I want you to look at it just in this time we have, what Jesus says is that a good man would lay down his life for his friends.

And then he says, significantly, you are my friends. Now, what I...

This statement, I think, is a very broad statement indeed. And what has happened here, I think, is significant for this reason.

[9 : 10] that Jesus makes the statement and by making it demonstrates that these people are his friends.

Now, they might not think they were his friends. They might, in fact, be his enemies. But if you look at friendship, you realize that somebody has got to initiate it.

You know? Somebody has got to say, let's have lunch together. Let's go for a walk together. Would you like this? Can I provide... We have to initiate it in some way. There are two total isolated strangers.

And one of them has to take the initial step of initiating a relationship, a friendship. So friendship has got to be initiated.

And it's a risky thing, initiating a friendship. It's a very confusing thing when you initiate friendships between a man and a woman because there are lots of other factors working there.

[10 : 18] But somebody has got to initiate a friendship. I don't think men are very good at doing it. It's a very difficult thing to do.

But somebody's got to do it. And what Jesus is saying is that God has initiated a friendship with us. And the way he has done that is giving his only begotten son to die on a cross.

That is God's initiating activity. That is God saying and underlining, you are my friends. You have the freedom to refuse my friendship.

You have the freedom to accept my friendship. You have the freedom to ignore my friendship. You have the freedom to suspect my motives. You have all those things.

But as clearly and unmistakably as it's possible to do, I want you to know that you are my friends.

And the reason I want you to know that is because I have laid down my life for you.

[11 : 30] He's done that. That is the world in which we live. And we have to respond to that because that says a whole lot of things.

When it says that I lay down my life for my friends, it means I consider you to be worth doing this for.

So our worth suddenly goes way up. That's why I made those cynical remarks about your inner, whatever it is, discover your inner potential.

I'd like you to discover the reality of God's love for you. God's discovery and acceptance of you has real potential.

Potential beyond all your imagining. And so the first thing that you see in the recognition of what God has done is the high value He places on you.

[12:33] I told you this story a few years ago, but you will have forgotten it by now. It had to do with a young man somewhere, I think, in the South Pacific who in his tribe, it was traditional that when you went for a bride, you paid the father of the bride one water buffalo.

And this young man was in love with a young lady and he went to the father and presented seven water buffalo. There wasn't any haggling about anything.

He just very generously gave this great gift to claim his bride. The father-in-law was deeply gratified. The young man had very articulately expressed the high regard he had for the lady he was to marry.

And she had a high sense of her own value because he had done this. And they lived happily ever after. Well, in a sense, you see, that's the spirit behind what Christ is saying here when he says, God is the one who has in Christ laid down his life for you to let you know who he is in loving you and to let you know your supreme worth in his sight.

That is terribly, terribly important that you should know that. But then you see what he goes on to say, what Jesus goes on to say is, now, how are you going to respond to this reality?

[14:23] Because it's a reality that you are confronted of in this world. You are not left alone in the dark with the temperature going down and the light fading and the isolation compounding itself all the time so that you feel more and more alone.

That's not where you are. You live in a world where God has clearly demonstrated the reality of his love for you by giving his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross.

And that's where he says to you. I mean, he doesn't say it in many places, but there he says, what is your response to me? How are you going to treat this?

And you have to answer it by saying, yes, I accept that, or no, I reject it.

You have to say yes or no to it. You may say no by simply ignoring it, but essentially, you are caught in a situation where you make a response voluntarily or involuntarily to what God has done for you in Christ.

[15:39] So, you have to respond in that way. So, then Jesus goes on and says this, you are my friends, if you love me, keep my commandments.

And so, what he's saying is that this, in fact, will be the result of your positive response, is that you will keep my commandments.

You won't, you won't do it in order to win friendship with me because that's already been given. That belongs to you right now. But what will happen is, in response to that, you will say, you know, you will seek to know what his will is and to obey it.

That's how you will live your life. Now, of course, this is what, this idea of friendship is the kind of, is the kind of relationship that exists in families where people are, have a kind of committed relationship to you.

But you see, friendship is different, too, in certain ways. Because friendship can cross every barrier. It can cross the barrier of language.

[17:11] It can cross the social barriers. You know how, in a city like Vancouver, we're always being drawn into groups that are most like us.

Disgusting, isn't it? But, you know, that gravitation is there. We like people who socially are the same as us. We like people who think the same, who love entertainment, all those things.

We like moving in that direction. But when Jesus says that the radical basis of relationship to me is not one of race or language or tribe or color or any of those things or even religion.

He says, friendship is something which crosses all those barriers. And that's because in Romans, the passage, which it says that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, demonstrating his friendship when we were totally alien to him.

So what has happened is that God seems to have penetrated through in our society this barrier that exists and to have established a basis of relationship which is totally independent of all those devices by which we separate ourselves from one another in our world and in our society.

[18 : 39] You know, that's what we always do and it's tragic but what God has done for us in Christ is meant to break through that so as to establish relationship.

And so, I mean, I don't know whether you think this is out of line to say this but it would be great, wouldn't it, if we could have friendships with people who were totally different than us, who belonged to a different language, who had a different skin color, who belonged to a different race, who belonged to a different culture, if we could venture into the area of having friends of that kind, that would be a wonderful thing to do.

We generally regard it as too risky a thing to do and so we keep to our own. I think I've told you that business that the Red Cross says that in our world today there's 2,000 potential Rwanda situations where people are in basic conflict with one another.

Well, how do you break that down? How do you break it down even in relatively speaking a homogeneous community like Vancouver? It's very difficult.

And you see what's happened here is that the way that it's worked out is that God has, in a sense, crashed the barrier.

[20 : 16] And he said, I will unilaterally declare and unconditionally commit myself to the reality of my love for you.

And that is demonstrated in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, you may find that very difficult. You'd rather leave God out of your life than submit to that.

Submit to God's overture of love towards you. You may find that you are too proud an individual to be able to do that.

You're too independent to be able to do that. But that's why I said, I think that Merv put it up here, you can't steal what's been given to you.

You know, this is of the nature of a gift. It's not something you can achieve. It's not something you can earn. It's not something you can steal.

[21 : 21] It's only something that's been given to you and you can take it. And that's why the preaching of the gospel is essentially saying, here it is.

This is the nature of God's love for you. This is the measure of God's evaluation of you, your supreme worth, and that it belongs to you, and it's yours for the taking as a gift.

That's all you can do. Now, that's what happens, and that's why Jesus, I think, in the very next line says, you are my friends because I've committed myself to you.

Are you my friends in terms of having committed yourself to me? If you respond, then the measure of your response is that you do what I command. And he confuses the whole picture by saying, my command is that you love one another.

I say he confuses the picture because that is, you know, we would think of a thousand religious duties that we would submit ourselves to, but to actually reach out in love to one another in response to the love that's been shown us.

[22 : 50] What he's saying is that you are a big, big person. And because you have known or accepted the reality of God's love for you, then you can reach out generously in love to other people.

And you can cross all the barriers in that love. It doesn't matter what they are, you can cross them all. And you can, you can, that's what it means.

If you love me, you will respond and your response will be that you'll keep my commandment and my commandment is that you love one another. Back to the existential human dilemma.

Here you have it. This is as far as we can get, humanly speaking. Because what we need here, and what our society denies is possible, these two have to fight until one wins.

And when the rather sophisticated argument from science is over, and when they have exercised the highest capacity of their intellect in arguing with one another, they ultimately have got to come to a place where they bow down to a truth that is bigger than both of them.

[24 : 12] Because truth demands submission. And what people need to do is to find a place of submission.

Otherwise, we can only and eternally be in conflict with one another. My trying to demonstrate to you my essential superiority, and you trying to demonstrate to me your essential superiority, superiority, and my saying, well, you can have your essential superiority, and I'll keep mine, and we're nowhere.

What we need is the place where we can bow down and acknowledge a reality which is greater than us both, and to which we essentially must submit.

That's what's required in our kind of world, world. And that's what we need to do, and that's the place we need to come to. So you get this amazing picture, God demonstrating his love in that demonstrating your worth, and then asking for your response.

Yes or no? If you love me as I have demonstrated my love to you, then you will keep my commandments. let me pray.

[25 : 36] Our God and Father, our world is a very challenging and difficult and sometimes confusing world, and we are so easily caught up in the ideologies of our world.

Help us by your grace to come to the place of acknowledging truth and recognizing that we must submit to it.

It's not something we possess, it's something which ultimately must possess us. It's not something that we can do honor to, but which ultimately does honor to us.

us. So our God, help us to recognize the reality of your love for us, and that we may respond to that love by loving you, and that love may be expressed in our obedience to you.

We ask in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.