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(Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; 9:23-26, 57-62)

Intro. The kingdom of heaven is like a path which is narrow due to overgrown weeds & thorns & thistles & along which snakes frequently slither & wolves often stalk & only the courageously committed walk the path. The other path in life is wide & alongside it grows beautiful flowers & there are small petting zoos along the way, where sheep & goats & bunnies & little piglets stand ready to greet any & all, & almost everyone chooses this path. Here’s the interpretation of the parable: the narrow path is the only way to heaven & the weeds & thorns & thistles are the afflictions Christians face in life & the snakes & wolves are there to intimidate & scare off others from walking that route which takes courage & commitment. The wide path is the way of the world & everything appears charming & pleasant, but the sheep are really wolves in sheep clothing & the flowers are covered in thorns—many of the same afflictions come in life, but most of the world is deceived into the allurements of the outward beauty of hell without seeing beneath the flowery petals & soft fur.

Today I want to talk to you about the one pathway that leads to life & since we are promoting Tailgate Sunday with all these teams represented, I’ve worded it as “The Pathway to Victory” from portions of the good news of Jesus according to Luke, looking at a few verses from chapters 5 & 9.

Theme: Gospel & the Christian Life

Background: Luke was the only Gospel writer who wasn’t an eyewitness of Jesus, but he used numerous sources, including Mary and possibly Paul, in his research to present Jesus primarily to the Gentile world as Savior of the world.

➤ As we take a closer look at these verses I’ve just read, I want to share with you 3 summary truths about the “Pathway to Victory.”

1. **The pathway to victory begins with the basics (5:1-11, 27-32)—the gospel & following Jesus**

- All great athletes started off learning the basics—swinging a golf club, throwing & catching & batting stance; dribbling & shooting & passing in basketball, etc.
- When we read these passages in Luke 5, we see Peter, James & John & Levi (Matthew) leaving their way of life to pursue Jesus—they knew Him as a great Teacher & Prophet & they were learning He is the Lord
- As Lord, Jesus can call sinners to repentance (turning from their sin) to follow Him
- To get started on the “Pathway to Victory” in life, you must begin with the basics & learn what the gospel is & what it means to follow Jesus
- “gospel” simply means “good news” & refers to the death of Christ (the promised One) for our sins (because those sins separate us from a holy God), His burial (to prove He was dead), resurrection (proving He is the promised Messiah & Lord of all) & appearances (proving He really rose from the dead)
- “following Jesus” means turning away from your old life (of sin & doing what you want to do) & pursuing Christ—it is both repentance from sin & trusting in Him

Illus: Ultimately, becoming a follower of Jesus is surrendering your life & letting Christ live in & through you—when I coached T-ball, I often stood behind the 4 or 5 year old & helped them hold the bat & swing at the ball to teach them timing & hand-eye coordination—they were hitting the ball but I was doing everything for them. Teaching my kids basketball, I often picked them up when they were toddlers & let them throw the basket in the goal (& even taught them to hang on the rim & hold their tongues out, chanting, “White men can jump!”)—they made the basket but I did all the work for them—following Jesus is surrendering to Jesus to live His life through you—it’s a lifelong process but it begins when you surrender to Him

2. **The pathway to victory builds on the basics (9:23-26)—growing as a Christian while following Jesus**

Illus: No coach thinks you can just teach a kid how to swing a golf club or kick a soccer ball or dribble a basketball or throw a baseball & then you wait for others to vote you into the Coach’s Hall of Fame—you have to add to it & learn new elements & often work as a team

- Jesus built on what it means to follow Him—deny self (repentance), take up cross daily (sacrificial trust) & follow Him

- If you try to hold on to your life, you will lose it & perish, but if you give up your life for the sake of Christ, you will find that He will save you & give you far better life than you could ever dream

Illus: Gaining the whole world does you absolutely no good if you lose your soul—Donald Trump can make billions of \$\$\$ & be elected President of the United States & have far more than anyone would ever imagine & still spend an eternity in hell because of his sin

- If you truly follow Jesus, you will let others know (9:26)—you should have the courage to get baptized, join a local, Bible-teaching church, fellowship with others & tell others about your commitment to Him—all these are ways you grow while following Jesus
- Jesus kept building on what it means to follow Him—when some heard His demands, they turned away from Him, but real followers & those on the “Pathway to Victory” stick it out & receive discipline to grow

3. The pathway to victory brings great sacrifices beyond the basics (9:57-62)—putting Jesus first in all of life

- These 3 short scenarios of people Jesus encountered who claimed they wanted to follow Jesus but take care of other matters first reveal they really don’t know what following Jesus means—it means you must put Him first in all of life & everything else comes after that

Illus: Yesterday while helping coach my oldest son’s baseball team & later managing my younger son’s team, a couple of players decided not to listen to my instructions & do what they wanted to do & both times it cost us a run—one kid failed to get in a rundown so we could score a runner from third & another kid failed to run the ball back to the pitcher & threw it over his head—players need to follow the manager first & he has the team’s success in mind—Jesus is the manager (& general manager & owner) & He has your ultimate best in mind, but you must follow Him & put Him first

Illus: Champions in team sports learn how to become disciplined as a group & put the team before themselves—after the LA Lakers three-peated from 2000-2002, Shaq & Kobe began fighting to see who was going to be the best on the team & the team spiraled downward; UK’s men’s basketball team had great success last year because a number of individual stars learned to put the team first—put Jesus first & the pathway you’ll be on will lead you to victory & life

Conc. Another modern-day parable may go something like this: The kingdom of heaven is like a baseball game. The Nashville Saints are hosting the Las Vegas Sinners. The bases are loaded & the Saints are down 3-0. It’s the bottom of the 9th & there are 2 outs. The starting pitcher for the Sinners was crafty man Ted Bundy, but after allowing the bases to be loaded, he was released for the closer, Jeffrey Dahmer, who had been called on to finish them off & he’s diced up the first two batters he faced. Now, the Saints decide to pinch-hit for their aging star, Billy Graham, who is already 0-3 on the day. They call on the young gun, Rob Bell, who showed a lot of promise at one time. Maybe he will come through in the clutch. After fighting off a few of Dahmer’s nasty cutters, Bell worked the count to 3-2. Then with a belt-high fast ball, Bell sends it into the leftfield bleachers & the crowd goes wild & celebration begins. But wait! The manager of the Sinners, Lou Cifer, calls for an appeal & they throw a ball to first base & step on the bag. The umpire calls him out, because he missed first base, & since it was the 3rd out by force, none of the runs count & the Saints lose. The meaning of the parable is this: saints & sinners are real, but sometimes sinners try to slip in among the saints. First base represents salvation, second base growth, third base service & home plate represents heaven. Every base is important for the Christian life, but first base is the most important—if you aren’t really saved, it doesn’t matter how long you go to church or what good you think you do. You must become a follower of Jesus on the “Pathway to Victory” by turning from sin & trusting in Jesus, growing in your relationship with Him & putting Him first in all of life. So don’t you want to win?