

The Gospel According To Lou

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I want to talk about something that really has been on my mind and heart for a growing number of years, as I have had more and more opportunity to talk to people, to counsel with people, both informally and formally, and just seeing what's going on in their lives. I have no idea how this is going to go, exactly. We are going to have to fly sort of fast and low, so let's see how this goes.

There is one guy that I really wish was here today, and I think you know who that is. I really wish Lou was here. I wish his big, old smiling face was here. He died a couple of weeks ago, and those of you who don't know Lou, he was just a beloved institution in our church, and I think he was most characterized by his smile. In fact, I think his smile is just hanging around somewhere like a Cheshire Cat grin. You can just feel his presence here.

Lou suffered a lot through the last years of his life and when the dialysis was no longer possible, we all knew it was just a matter of days, and it was. But Lou was Lou right 'til the end. He was humorous and cheerful and unafraid the whole time.

Three days before he died, Marian and I got to go visit him in the hospital. Lou was sitting up in bed and Marian was sitting in the only chair in the room, so I knelt next to Marian and the two of us were looking up at Lou, holding hands all the way around. And there was Lou with that face-splitting grin of his with the gap between the front teeth and he was kind of looking down at us. He looked at us for just a second or two and he said, "Love each other, just love each other." He let that sink in for a couple of beats and then he said, "And kid around a little bit..." It was so Lou!

I kept thinking about what Lou said and it dawned on me that what Lou had given us was this perfect, complete, and compact summary of all of Jesus' teachings. It was like a perfect little Gospel according to Lou. Chapter 1, Verse 1: "Love each other, just love each other;" Chapter 1, Verse 2: "And kid around a little bit." And Lou lived that gospel every day, and that is why we loved him--because we knew he loved us. He made us feel better about ourselves, and he made us feel important every time he greeted us. He stood out because of that.

Then I started thinking, isn't it sad that he stood out because of that? Isn't that like some sort of minimum system requirement for Christians? But how many Christians do you know that you can say are really and truly happy? Let me rephrase that. How many Christians do you know that you can say are *characterized by contentment* the way that Lou was? Lou wasn't perfect. Right? Marge could probably tell us about his black days and his down days and his mean and nasty days. But Lou was *characterized* by contentment. That means that more often than not he was content and he was cheerful and he was humorous and he was giving. All those things that we knew about Lou.

What I am thinking about is that I don't know very many Christians like that. And that is sad to me. Most of the Christians I know seem to be ranging somewhere between miserable and struggling. I have had some friends tell me, flat out, that they think their life is just like a pile of stuff that they have to get through to get to the other side. It's almost like we are treating our lives like Nebraska or Kansas—flyover country: something we have to just get through to get someplace else we want to go. I apologize if anyone is from Nebraska or Kansas... Or like the Medieval self-flagellates. Those who walked around beating themselves on the back with whips, thinking that they had to mortify their flesh to identify with the wounds of Christ, in order to identify with Him. I hope by the way I am putting this, that you kind of sense the wrongness of it. There is something wrong there.

I want to read you a letter. Just a paragraph of a letter from a woman who wrote in from an internet discussion group that I recently joined. She has been a Christian since she was nine. She is thirty-four years old and a mother of three. She had a rough life but it was just starting to settle down. She had a new

husband, a stable family life and a new church. Then there was this devastating split within her church and it put her in a tailspin.

She wrote this: “Sometimes I don’t even allow myself to ponder the questions because when I do I can’t stop. But I have come to the realization that I may never find what I am looking for. I must say, and I hope none of you will take offense, that I honestly don’t even know if the one true God does exist in the way the Bible states. Was the Bible, in fact, man’s attempt to explain the unexplainable in our world and to make sense of it by assigning a God who is in control of all things? I am like a lost sheep at this time in my life. Crying out silently with questions that no man can answer. Who are we? Why are we here? Who am I? My questions go even deeper and unfortunately I am told that it is a matter of faith to know the answers. The sad thing is I want to have faith but I have none left. I am afraid of being deceived. Every single religious group out there thinks they have the corner on the market of truth. Now, how can this be? In my heart I want to go back to being nine years old and believing that there is a good God and there is a man and savior who cares for me, even if no one else does. But I can’t.”

This still gets to me. It just breaks my heart. I wanted to crawl through the computer and just hug that little nine year old girl inside of her and hold her and tell her everything is going to be alright. What has happened to us? What is wrong with us? What’s not good enough about the good news that it doesn’t transform our lives? What’s wrong with the message of Jesus that it doesn’t have the power that it should have? We’re supposed to be the ones who have something to give. We’re supposed to be the ones that have hope to offer to somebody else because of what the Lord has given us.

So, what I want to do today is think about those things, and I want to ask a specific question. How can we transform our lives? How can we become characterized by contentment the way Lou was? Now if you are thinking that I am thinking that the Gospel of Lou has something to do with this, you are thinking right. What we have got to do is to take the Gospel of Lou and put it against the teaching of Jesus and see if they square up. To see if there is some power there to give us a clue.

To do that, I think we need to start with the red parts. What are the red parts? How many of you have Bibles that are red letter editions that have the words of Jesus printed in red ink? If you don’t, I think it might be a good investment. Why the red parts first? Because the black parts are of less value or less importance? Of course not. But because historically the red parts, generally speaking, came first. And why is that important? Because we are talking about transforming lives. And that crucial first generation of followers of Jesus, the ones that actually lived and talked with him—what did they have to work with? They didn’t have the black parts for awhile. They didn’t have the letters of Paul for 20 or 30 years after the crucifixion. They didn’t have the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke for 40 to 70 years after the crucifixion. But most scholars now think that they did have an early written gospel, a proto-gospel maybe. It was different than ours because it was a gospel of sayings, just a collection of all the sayings of Jesus. It doesn’t exist anymore, but we know that it must have existed because if you take the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and compare them side by side there are large blocks of text that are identical, or so nearly identical among the three, that they must have had a source, a written source, that was used when the authors were compiling the gospel.

The name of this hypothetical gospel is the gospel of Q, which is from the German word quelle, which means source. Now we can get a sense of what the Q gospel was all about, the gospel that the first followers had, if we read the red parts of Matthew, Mark and Luke and focus on the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and the parables and proverbs of Jesus—the teaching parts. When you do that, and I hope you will, something jumps out at you.

If I were to ask you what the main theme of all of Jesus teaching is, could you tell me? Well, if you read the red parts there is a phrase you will see over and over again. Jesus is always talking about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is like this. The Kingdom of God is like that. This is how you go into the Kingdom of God... The Kingdom of God is the main theme of all of Jesus teaching. It is the organizing principle around which He hangs all of his teaching.

Now we will have a problem right off the bat that we need to get straight. Because if you are like me, I was always taught and assumed, or both, that the Kingdom of God was heaven. Anybody thinking that still? If you think that Jesus was talking about heaven when He was talking about the Kingdom of God, it is going to be almost impossible to get what He was talking about in His teaching. The Kingdom of God is *not* heaven. Heaven can be considered a part of the Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom of God is not heaven. The Kingdom of God is not even a place at all. The Greek word *basileia*, which was translated “kingdom” into the English by the King James’ translators 400 years ago, is itself a translation of an Aramaic word, *malchut*, which is the word Jesus, Himself, probably used. Neither word has a the primary connotation of having anything to do with the geography or territory of the king or kingdom. What it has to do with is the activities of the king. The sovereign dominion of the king. Some modern scholars are translating it as the imperial rule or reign of God.

As we take all these notions, and we put them together in a translation that I think will be most meaningful to us, I think we can safely use “the will of God.” Because certainly the activities of the king and his rule are contained within his will. So when you read the red parts, and you see Kingdom of God, if you think about the will of God, I think you are getting to the essence of what Jesus is trying to tell us. We Christians are obsessed with the will of God. We are always trying to figure out the will of God in our lives. There are shelves of books dedicated to the subject.

I spent years trying to figure out what the will of God was in my life. I remember thinking that God had this perfect plan for my life and I had to figure out what it was. I had to break the code and execute the plan with no direct help. And if I didn’t do it, then somehow I was always going to be less than this plan that God had for me. Does that ring any bells? What a lot of pressure to put on ourselves. The ironic thing is that if we ask the right questions, Jesus is always standing ready to answer. He always has been, because He put it right there in the red parts. But we have to ask the right questions, and we usually ask the wrong ones. We ask questions that start with what, when, and where. What do I have to do to enter the Kingdom and the will of God? Where do I have to go? When will the will of God be manifested in my life? These are the same questions that Jesus was asked during His lifetime. He didn’t answer them then, and He doesn’t answer them now. He doesn’t answer them because what, when, and where questions deal with space and time. They deal with quantity; they deal with temporal things. In the face of eternity, they have no meaning. They imply a sort of deferment between this present moment, this right now, and sometime out there when these things are going to be fulfilled. Jesus doesn’t answer these questions.

He answers questions that start with the word “how.” Because how is timeless. How deals with quality. How deals with state of being. And one of the key components of the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching is that it’s right now. It’s not then, it is now. In Jesus’ proclamation, His sort of coming out party in Mark 1:15, He said, “The waiting is over. The Kingdom is here, the Kingdom is now.” He said the Kingdom is within you and among you. It’s in your midst. You don’t have to wait for it. Now he does talk about a future Kingdom too, and I don’t want you to be confused. But the future Kingdom is just like the present Kingdom. They are not different—or the only difference is that whereas the present Kingdom is implicit—it’s private, it exists in the hearts of those who choose to enter—the future Kingdom will be explicit, it will be public. It will be God’s will made manifest, real, throughout his creation. So, you have to ask the right questions. Instead of, “What do I have to do to enter the Kingdom,” we should be asking, “How do I live in the Kingdom?” Do you see the difference? Do you see how that is the right-now question? It’s not something out there, it’s right now. I can have it this moment as soon as I walk out in the parking lot. So, how do we live in the Kingdom? How do we live in the will of God? Let’s go to the Gospel of Lou. Chapter 1, Verse 1: Love each other, just love each other.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He went right to what is called the Shema. That is the Jewish profession of faith. You will find in Deuteronomy 6:4 where it’s written “Hear O Israel. The Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your might, and with all your strength.” But Jesus didn’t stop there. He said there is another commandment that is just like the first and He went to Leviticus 19:18 and He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself. And on these two hang all laws of the prophets.” So, Jesus has taken two commandments and morphed them into one. But He’s done more than that. He’s saying you keep the first commandment *by keeping the second* commandment. If you want to love God, you love your neighbor. When someone remarked to

Jesus that loving your neighbor was more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices, He agreed. He called him a wise man. He said if you have something against your brother, if you hurt your brother, don't go to the temple and leave sin offerings on the altar, go to your brother and work it out. He said when you do this to the least of these, you do this to me. So, Jesus is saying the only way that we can love God is to love our neighbor. Because if we don't do that, at least that, nothing else matters. Everything else is meaningless. So, how do we live in the will of God? We love each other. But that is not all.

There is the Gospel of Lou, Chapter 1, Verse 2: Kid around a little bit. Jesus says if you don't become like one of these little children, then you are not going to enter the Kingdom. What is the hallmark of a child except exuberance and playfulness and acceptance and openness. Sunday school stuff, basically. The problem is that we don't take it to the logical and radical conclusion so that it has a radical effect on us. Where it changes us and starts to transform us.

Let me ask you another question. Was Jesus a hypocrite? If Jesus told us to do something that He Himself didn't believe, He Himself didn't practice, then He was a hypocrite. If Jesus didn't practice being childlike, then by His own definition, He wasn't in the Kingdom. He wasn't in the will of God. And if not Jesus, then who? We need to take a look at who Jesus is telling us He was and is. What is your image of Jesus? Think about it in your mind's eye. Think about every movie you have ever seen of Him. Think about every oil painting you have ever seen of Him. What does He look like? Usually He is standing ramrod straight with these perfectly symmetrical folds in His robe, arms extended, maybe gazing heavenward. Or if He is pictured with a child, how does He look? Sitting quietly with a child on his knee, maybe stroking the child's hair. Does that sound like any kid you know? Certainly not my Sean, my six year old. He's everywhere at once, all over the house. We have to see this.

Jesus is telling us that He loved to live His life. He enjoyed His life. He enjoyed his friends. He had fun. I see Jesus as always the first guy in the pool. The guy who is leading the band. He loved his friends. I think He probably ran every where He went because He was so excited to get there. When He was with His friends, He joked with them, He laughed with them, He gave them bear hugs, maybe noogies. And when he played with kids, think about it, how do *you* play with your kids? He didn't just sit them quietly on His knee. I think He was rolling around on the ground, tickling them and playing tag. Maybe playing whatever passed for soccer in those days. You have got to see this. And then we can't even stop there, can we? Because Phillip said to Jesus, "Lord, just show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." You can almost see Jesus holding His head in His hands saying, "Philip, dude, how long have you been hanging with me, and you still don't get it. I could teach a monkey faster! If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." A loose paraphrase...

So, now what are we going to do with the Creator God of the universe who would just as soon go play hide and seek with us as to go create another solar system? That's what Jesus is telling us. We have got a God in heaven who is a playful God, a joyful God, a gleeful God and a child-like God. You've got to see the radical conclusion to Jesus' words so that you have a model that you can identify with of how we are to live our lives. Our lives are supposed to be fun. We are supposed to enjoy them. We are not supposed to defer them. Treat them as something we are just supposed to get through until we die and go to heaven. That's not it.

So, how do we live in the Kingdom of God? How do we live in the will of God? By loving each other and kidding around a little bit. Now, some of you out there have got to be thinking by this time, what about faith? Because this sounds like a lot of works, doesn't it? And it's by faith that we are saved, not by works. But we are not talking about salvation here, are we? Jesus isn't talking about salvation here. The Kingdom is not heaven, remember? We have to make the separation. What are we doing worrying about salvation anyway? If we are still worrying about our salvation, than no wonder we're depressed. We have to take our salvation and consider it an accomplished act. Done, completed, fulfilled. We have to take our salvation off the table as a non-negotiable item because it is. Think about that. And then we need to relax and stop worrying about it and focus on what Jesus is focusing on right here. Which is what? Nothing more than the moment-by-moment, day-by-day practice of the presence of God. The day-by-day living in the will of God. That is what we are talking about.

But faith still plays a crucial role even here. How so? Because bad things happen, right? Bad things happen to good people. Buses and buildings are bombed and children die and people lose their homes, families, jobs, and their income and their health. They lose their opportunity for dialysis and they have to face death in a few days. And when these things happen, the pain and suffering that is caused is real. You can't deny it, you can't just wish it away. It's real. And when these things happen, they can absolutely devastate the sense of Kingdom in your life. They can take the presence of God, that sense of it, and shatter it.

That is where faith comes in. Faith can help bridge the gap. Faith can help transcend the pain until some sort of restoration is possible. Now, maybe you are thinking I have got faith, but I've also got a lot of pain. So what's up with that? So now we have to distinguish between faith and mere belief. Between faith and mental assent. You know that deal you make with yourself in your mind about what you are going to believe. That is not faith. Faith is deeper. As James said, "Faith without works is dead." Okay, so what works do I have to perform to animate my faith? Anybody catch that? See how easy it is to get back to the "w" word? The "what" word. It's not a what question. It's not *what* do we do to animate our faith. Better would be, "How do we animate our faith?" That is a right-now question. We can get an answer to that. So, *how* do we animate our faith? By living in the Kingdom. How do we live in the Kingdom? By loving each other and kidding around a little bit. See how we come full circle?

Remember that letter I read at the very beginning? The moderator of the group wrote a response, and I just want to read the last paragraph of it. Remember this is the woman who didn't know if there was a God anymore, didn't know who she was or why she was here, which end was up. I want to read his response, the last paragraph, because I can't say it any better than this.

"My advice is to start with things you can be sure of and then work your way forward. You can be sure that it is right to show compassion and kindness to your fellow human being. You can be sure that it is right to work to help others in need. You can be sure that it is right to listen to those who have no one to listen to them. You can be sure it is right to teach your children to act with dignity and virtue. In doing these things, you will begin to hear the still, small voice of God speaking back to you—in these things you can be sure of. This is the beginning of wisdom. Beliefs comes later. Jesus knew where to start with us. Lou knew where to start. You start by entering the Kingdom. You start by entering the will of God. And once you are in there, you start hearing the voice of God. You start experiencing Him. And once you start to experience Him, you start to trust Him.

Okay, now we are at ground zero. Trust. It is like the Holy Grail. Because when you trust God, your faith is fully alive and fully active. When you trust God there is no room for worry and stress and tension. When you trust God, you are truly childlike. You are fully in the Kingdom. Jesus was giving us a way. A way to trust. A way to live in the will of God. In fact, those first followers of Jesus we talked about, did you know they didn't call themselves Christians? That came later. They called themselves followers of the Way. What way? *This* way, the one we are talking about right now. The way of Jesus. The way of trust. And why was the way necessary? The way was necessary because trust can't be self-initiated. You can't will yourself to trust anybody or anything. Trust is a process. Trust is an experience. Trust is the sum of all the moments of trustworthiness that you experience with someone or something. Trust is the condition that exists after someone has proven themselves trustworthy to you. A child trusts naturally out of their innocence, then learns not to trust when the first hurts comes. Jesus is showing us the way back to trust. *The Way*.

So, let's go back to the original question. How do we transform our lives? How do we become characterized by contentment? By trusting God. But trust can't be self-initiated. So, how do we trust God? We trust God by animating our faith. How do we animate our faith? We animate our faith by living in the Kingdom. How do we live in the Kingdom? We live in the Kingdom by loving each other and kidding around a little bit. Now, do we have to remember all of that? Of course not. Cut out all the middle men. How do we transform our lives? By loving each other and kidding around a little bit. The Gospel of Lou. The Way of Jesus. It's so simple.

I don't know how this is all striking you. There might have been some things that don't square with what you thought doctrinally or theologically. But I would hope at least that if you sense you are one of those people who can't be counted among those who are characterized by contentment, that you would go home and start to read the red parts. In light of what we have talked about this morning, see if there isn't a Jesus who is playful and gleeful and exuberant coming alive for you in those pages. A practical, concrete Jesus who gives practical and concrete things for us to do that will work us into the Kingdom and start the whole process. Do you see that what we've done is we have taken our faith and made it so complex and so esoteric that we have pulled it out of the sphere of our daily lives, and from way up there, it has no power to transform us. Our spiritual life is way over here, and our daily life is way over there, and the two don't intersect, or rarely intersect. Jesus is showing us the way to bring them back together again, because when the two become one, our life becomes a prayer. A constant and continuous prayer. And then at some point I would hope and pray that you would be willing to take everything you think you know and everything you think you need to do, and just lay it down. Lay it down. And then with nothing more than the Gospel of Lou in your sack, begin again. See what happens. So, I guess that just leaves one more question. How do we begin? For that, I would like to leave you with this.

Everybody close your eyes. Now start making a movie in your mind. You are nine years old. If there are any nine year olds in here, then that's not much of a stretch. You are nine years old and you are in the middle of a long, hot summer vacation that as far as you're concerned, could last forever. You are outside; you are in your swimsuit; the sun is warm on your shoulders and back, and you are standing backwards at the edge of the pool, arms straight out from your side, eyes closed and just your toes gripping the stone ledge. Can you see that? Been there before? Now, the last time you looked back, about five seconds ago, that pool was full of crystal blue water. And you believe that that water is still there. You believe that no one has drained it, or that it has evaporated away. You believe that the water is going to catch you as you fall. You *believe* these things but you won't *know* these things until you push down slightly with your toes and shift your weight back past the balance point. With everything in your brain screaming that this is dangerous, that this could hurt you, that this could kill you. But that is part of the thrill, isn't it? The sense of danger, sense of risk, with an underlying trust that everything is going to be alright. This is why we love roller coasters, isn't it? This is why we love thrill rides.

And this is how we can learn to love our lives again—if we will let it. A sense of danger, a sense of risk, with the underlying trust that everything is going to be alright. So how do we begin? Just push down slightly with your toes and let yourself fall.

And enjoy the ride. You've got to enjoy the ride.