

## Introduction

I'd like to begin this morning with a gesture. The letter I'm forming on my forehead is an "L." If I direct that "L" to you, it means of course that I think you're a loser. But let me ask you a question about that. Is it an insult or a complement that I think you are? The answer is, "It depends on the context." In the context of the passage I read, Ephesians 5:15-21, it's a complement. This passage calls us to be an "L," a loser, and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Ephesians 5.

## Be an "L"

In verses 3-14, Paul calls us to walk in light in contrast to those apart from Jesus who walk in darkness. The word "therefore" in verse 15 connects verses 15-21 with that call. To walk in light, according to verse 15, requires that we walk wisely. Paul then gets specific and mentions six things that walking wisely entails. I'm going to address the sixth of those, in verse 21. Be subject to one another.

The one another Paul is talking about here are other Christians. But we know from various passages that it isn't just other Christians. It's everyone we know and meet: spouses, parents, children, co-workers, neighbors, employees, classmates, drivers, and so on.

Notice what we're to do in relation to those people. We are to be subject to them. The KJV translates the word "subject" as "submit" but the meaning is the same. To subject or submit ourselves to people means to yield to them. Or as I'm saying it today, it means to lose. Robert Schuller claims that there exists in every human being a subconscious combative attitude that says, **"I'm going to win in this relationship. I'm going to be the one who pulls the strings and call the shots in it."** But to have that attitude is to walk unwisely and be in darkness. God wants us to have this attitude instead: **"I'm going to lose in this relationship. I'm going to let the other person pull the strings and call the shots in it."** God wants us to be an "L" in other words.

## Not Losing - Principles

The first step in being a loser of course is to understand what it means. So, let's figure that out – what it means.

Thomas Jefferson said something that helps us do that: **“In matters of preference, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.”** That's an outstanding insight. Notice that Jefferson mentions two things: preferences and our principles.

Principles are the things we believe about what is true and false or what is right and wrong. Jesus rose from the dead. Abortion is murder. Adultery for any reason is always wrong. Honesty is the best policy. Hate the sin but love the sinner. Play to an audience of one not many. Those are a sampling of principles that many of us have.

Now, losing doesn't have anything to do with our principles. As Paul makes clear in Galatians 2:5, we shouldn't yield our principles for any reason to anyone. We should stand like a rock instead. That means either defend them or promote them as the circumstances dictate.

I read about a teenager named Sheila. Sheila was a gifted singer and thus was given the lead part in her high school play. But her heart sank when she read the script and a scene in it. In that scene, her character was to meet a handsome stranger, take him home with her, and sexually seduce him. She was a devoted follower of Jesus though and believed it was wrong to play the scene. She asked the drama teacher in charge, therefore, to take it out but she wouldn't. So she asked the teacher for another part in the play, a lesser part, but she wouldn't give it to her. She told Sheila that she would play either the lead part or none at all. She chose none at all and was dropped from the play.

Sheila refused to lose, to yield, and rightly so. It was a matter of principle, right and wrong, and she walked wisely. She stood like a rock. The moral is this. Losing has nothing to do with our principles.

## Losing – Preferences

What it does have to do with is our preferences. Preferences are

matters of opinion not truth. They're what we like and dislike not what is right and wrong. We have as many preferences as we do principles. Let's take a little survey. Do you prefer hymns or choruses? Do you prefer dogs or cats or neither? Do you prefer poultry, beef, or pork? You get the point. All of have countless preferences about things.

Now, there's a vast difference between principles and preferences. For one thing, principles are objective and preferences subjective. God determines principles. We determine preferences. For another thing, principles are absolute and preferences relative. Principles stay the same but preferences change from one person to the next.

That means that while we shouldn't yield our principles, we usually should our preferences. Some in my church, for instance, wanted the new sanctuary carpet to be red and others blue. So the blues yielded and let it be red. We should not lose when it comes to our principles. But we usually should lose when it comes to our preferences.

Notice I said "usually." That's because there is a limit to losing. That limit is the point at which it becomes destructive. Whether to lose or not to is occasionally a complicated issue. There is no law of losing that tells us how to act in every situation. The best we have is a general rule. Yield our preferences until it's destructive – until it hurts more than helps. We need to apply that rule on a case-by-case basis, asking the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us as we do.

But apart from the exceptional times when it's destructive, we should lose, we should yield, when it comes to our preferences

## **Why Lose**

We should because of what it does. It creates peace. That is the effect of losing. It's relational peace.

Remember what I said about preferences. They're relative not absolute. They change from one person to the next. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out the implication of that. People's

preferences often conflict. We used to have a suggestion box in the narthex. I'll never forget two of the comments I pulled out of it years ago. One said "**I love the tambourine,**" which we had introduced into worship the week before. The very next week, I pulled out another that said, "**Get rid of the tambourine!!!**" (three exclamation points). We know it all too well. People's preferences often conflict.

We also know it all too well what happens when no one is willing to lose. In 1964, Eric Berne wrote a best selling book titled *The Games People Play*. He identified in it 36 games that people play in their relationships. The colloquial titles that he gives the games are funny but the games themselves are not. One of those, perhaps the one most frequently played, is "Uproar." That's what happens when no one is willing to lose. It's uproar.

But losing puts uproar to rest. It's a dynamic spiritual force that resolves the differences between us and creates peace.

Take husbands and wives, for instance. Research shows that women are more "linguistically gifted" than men are. That's a euphemism that means that women prefer to talk more than men do. According to psychologist James Dobson, women have a talking quotient of 50,000 words a day and men 25,000. Consequently, by the time husbands get home from work, they're ready to stop talking and their wives are ready to start. And the game begins, uproar. Dobson explains it well, "**Show me a quiet husband and I'll show you a frustrated wife.**" That's where losing comes in. Husbands and wives are supposed to subject themselves to each other. They're supposed to yield what they want to what their spouses want. So, husbands, if we do that and communicate with our wives, there won't be all the relational tension and nagging that not communicating creates.

You can see what the effect of losing is. It's relational peace.

### **How to Lose**

That's all well and good but let's face it. Losing is a whole lot

easier said than done. The fact is that verse 21 is one of the least obeyed commands in the Bible, even among long established followers of Jesus. I'd ask you the same question I've asked myself. Is yielding preferences something you consistently and habitually do? If you're like 98% of the people on planet earth, the answer is "no."

There's a reason for that. It's because we're predisposed, even programmed, to win not lose. So, our inner condition has to change in order for us to be losers. It has to change and can and here's how.

It's by deciding to follow Jesus. When we do, the Holy Spirit enters into the very ground of our being and begins to work there. He does several things. One of those is gradually change our predisposition from winning to losing. That change is first and foremost His work.

But it isn't only His work. It's ours as well. We must cooperate with Him by doing two things.

First, we must value losing.

The vast majority of people do not. Not only is it in their nature to win. It's in their value system as well. Profoundly influenced by American popular culture, they're actually philosophically opposed to losing. I once talked with a Christian who was fighting with his sister over their deceased mother's necklace. He asked me what he should do and so I told him - lose. **"Let her have it,"** I advised. To which he objected, **"No, it's the principle of the thing. I'm not going to be a doormat and let her walk all over me."** Notice the connection he made, between principle and being a doormat. I've heard numerous Christians make that connection, which shows us something. They're philosophically opposed to losing. They value winning not losing.

But notice the last words in verse 21, **"in the fear of Christ."** To be in the fear of Jesus means to be under His authority in totality. Study His teachings and life. You'll see what He values if you do, losing not winning. So, if we're under His authority, we will too. We'll value losing and pleasing Him far more highly than winning and getting our own way.

We must do a second thing to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work

in changing our predisposition. We must intend to lose.

I've talked before about the power of intent and it operates nowhere more vigorously than in winning. Stop and examine how resolute people are in getting their own way. The lengths they go to in that regard are astonishing. The Christian I talked about earlier, for instance, ended up suing his sister over the necklace. He intended to win.

But being in the fear of Jesus, we intend, just as vigorously, to lose instead. We make the decision to yield our preferences to others. We then go to whatever lengths it takes to carry it out.

My strategy of intent is this. I'm on the alert for the moments of crisis in my everyday life – the moments when my preferences clash with the preferences of others. When those moments arise, I quote verse 21 several times, focusing on the last five words, **“in the fear of Christ.”** I then ask the Holy Spirit to empower me to lovingly and wisely lose.

I had a neighbor, for instance, who brought his dogs to our property lines to “go potty.” He escaped the odor by doing that but exposed us to it. He preferred that his dogs “go potty” there but I preferred that they didn't. Remembering what Paul teaches in verse 21 though and asking the Holy Spirit's help, I lost. I yielded my preference to his. I said nothing about it but just cleaned it up myself on a regular basis.

I truly believe that the Holy Spirit honors intent. Intend to lose and He'll transform the person you are. He'll gradually change what you're predisposed to do. You'll find yourself less and less inclined to winning and more and more inclined to losing.

## **Conclusion**

With that in mind, I leave you in closing with one of the greatest ironies in life. When it comes to relationships, losing is almost always winning. Not only do God and others win. You do too. So, be an “L”! Be a loser!