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Jesus said:

“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

These are among the most important words that Jesus spoke.

They get to the very heart of what his message was about.

Except – unfortunately – they’re also among the most difficult to understand.

So, let’s step back for a moment –

in the hope that by approaching these words in a fresh and different way –  
we’ll be able to shed some light on them.



I've been reading a book recently – which talks a lot about the human brain.

The author is especially interested in the way in which the brain is made up of two hemispheres – one on the left and the other on the right.

He reminds us that these two hemispheres work in rather different ways.

Consider the humble sparrow – pecking seed from the ground.

It needs to do two very different things – and do them at the same time.

First – it needs focused concentrated attention on what’s in front of it – so that it pecks the *seed* and not the dirt and gravel.

But second – it needs the wide view – to keep alert to any possible *predators* that might be about to pounce on it –kill it – and eat it.

So, to accomplish these two *different* – and *simultaneous* feats – the brain has divided into two hemispheres.

The brain’s left hemisphere focuses on close-up view ...

... pecking the seed.

While the brain’s right hemisphere focuses on the wide-angle view ...

... looking out for predators.

Over time – as the *human* brain developed –

this division of labour between left and right hemispheres has remained.

The left hemisphere of our brain specialises in detailed, close-up, logical thinking.

It’s about function and efficiency.

It’s about getting things *done*.

It asks: “How is this – *useful*?”

The right hemisphere also has its own specialism.

But it's *not* about asking questions of usefulness.

Instead, it's about –

encounter and relationship –

the wider perspective –

valuing *things in themselves*.

Imagine yourself in an antique shop.

You see an intriguing and unusual-looking object – so you pick it up to examine it.

The brain's left hemisphere asks:

"I wonder what that's *for*?"

The right hemisphere – on the other hand –

in encountering the object –

simply appreciates the thing for its curious beauty.

Or again – you meet someone for the first time.

Maybe this person is important or accomplished – a specialist in their field.

The brain's logical left hemisphere thinks:

"This could be a very useful contact."

But the more imaginative right hemisphere –

with its love of relationship –

simply enjoys spending time with the person – for who they are –

a fascinating and unique human being.

Our course we need *both* hemispheres.

It's thanks to the logical – practically minded – left hemisphere that we live in a world of invention and technology –

with everything from the wheel and fire and writing –

to aeroplanes and smartphones and life-saving medical treatment.

However, there's a problem when left hemisphere thinking takes over.

And it seems to me – that's what Jesus is getting at –

when he talks about losing and gaining life.



If you're wondering how brain science can possibly relate to Jesus' teaching –

it's worth remembering that Jesus called us to repent.

And the Greek word for repentance is:

*metanoia*.

Literally – this means a change of mind.

So, what Jesus is calling for –

is for us to have our minds changed –

to think differently.



So – let's see how we get on –  
applying this hemisphere hypothesis –  
to Jesus' teaching.

And let's do that by looking at three examples ...  
moral behaviour – and  
our Christian faith – and  
the meaning of life.



First – moral behaviour.

When it comes to morality and ethics, the logical left hemisphere –  
comes up with all kinds of clever ways of working out what's right and what's wrong.

This is what the Pharisees specialised in.

Over time, they developed all kinds of rules and regulations to ensure that people didn't  
accidentally break God's commandments.

As an example –

*Work* wasn't allowed on the Sabbath.

But what *counted* as work?

Was it *work* to light a fire?

Well, yes ... according to the Pharisees.

Fire lighting was forbidden.

Now – we're not Pharisees –

but the brain's left hemisphere – still wants to *analyse* – in a logical way –  
the difference between right and wrong.

Some people say it's all about deciding which law – or rule – or commandment is most relevant.

And having worked out the rule – you then apply it.

Others say that it's about weighing up –

the good and bad –

the pleasure and the pain –

that will result from different courses of action.

*Both* of these are both *left* hemisphere ways of thinking.

But the problem is ...

In turning an ethical dilemma into a *logical* puzzle to be solved –

either by applying some rule –

or performing moral calculus –

You've lost the very essence of what it is to be a good person.

What I'm saying – is that – when our actions are nothing but the result of *calculation* – then we've lost any sense of *love*.

Does Jesus perform moral calculations?

No. Jesus takes the wide perspective.

He sees the world with eyes of love.

He uses his heart.

We – too – need the big picture – right hemisphere – perspective –  
that sees the world as God sees it –  
and sees us human beings –  
as flawed and sinful, yes –  
but also beautiful – precious – and deeply loved.

That's what Jeremiah was talking about in our Old Testament reading –  
when he speaks of laws being written on our hearts.

By clinging rigidly to the brute logic of calculating right and wrong –  
the very spirit of pure goodness –  
ends up slipping through our fingers.

We've tried to save our life –  
through weighing right and wrong –  
only to end up losing it.



As a second example, consider how we try to live out our Christian faith.

Some of us – maybe all of us – are people who turn to prayer.

To the brain's left hemisphere – prayer is something that needs to be *useful*.

We want *results* –  
inner peace in times of worry –  
healing for our sick friend –  
work for an unemployed relative –  
an end to war around the world.

But when we pray like that –

we miss out on the big picture – right hemisphere – understanding of prayer –  
which is all about  
encounter –  
relationship –  
the *thing in itself* ...

This is the approach to prayer which appreciates God for who God is –  
and which enjoys precious time in God's presence –  
as we rest in God's arms of everlasting love.

By seeing prayer as a *useful* means for getting what we want –  
the joy of spending time with God –  
ends up eluding us.

We've tried to save our life –  
through turning to prayer –  
only to end up losing it.

It's not just prayer – of course.

Holiness becomes –  
to the left hemisphere –  
a useful way of showing off your religious superiority among your believing  
friends ...  
rather than – as the right hemisphere understands it –  
a way of drawing close to God.

Church growth becomes –  
to left hemisphere –  
a useful means to paying the bills – and keeping the show on the road –  
rather than – as the right hemisphere perceives it –  
a way of bringing people into an encounter with the good news of Christ.

When faith becomes merely *useful* for some particular end –  
then the very *reason* for having faith in the first place –  
a living – loving – saving relationship with God –  
evaporates into thin air.

We've tried to save our life –  
through turning to religion –  
only to end up losing it.



And finally – looking at our lives as a whole –

Do we wonder what they're *for*?  
“What is the *meaning* of life?”  
“What is the *purpose* of life?”  
“What is life *for*?”

Because those – as you'll realise by now – are very *left* hemisphere ways of thinking about our  
existence.

There's more to life than knowing what it's *for*.

The alternative – right hemisphere view – is to engage with life as *life in itself* –  
something simply to be enjoyed and lived –  
Lived in encounter – with  
    this glorious and wonderful creation God has made –  
Lived in relationship – with  
    other people and with God –  
    as we freely give of ourselves.

When human life –  
    whether that's our *own* live –  
    or the lives of those *around* us ...

When human life –  
    is seen only in terms of being *useful* – then we lose it.

But when we *repent* – *metanoia* –

When our minds are changed ...

When we let go of this way of thinking ...

When we learn to see life as something –  
    to be lived – with gratitude –  
    as God's precious gift to us –  
    that's when we will truly find it.