

What Will It Profit a Man?

Text: Mat 16:24-28

Suggested Hymns:

155, 403, 351T364, 336, 449

1) A good intentioned rebuke

2) No salvation without sacrifice

3) Jesus - the hope of life

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 16:24-28, ²⁴ *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. ²⁸ "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are some people who seem always to associate Jesus with sweetness and light. They hardly ever mention His name without calling Him *"the gentle Master," "the kind Friend of children,"* and other terms of endearment.

Now it would be altogether wrong to deny that there is a facet to Jesus' character in which He appears in meekness, humility, and loving condescension. But a careful reading of the Gospels will also reveal that on occasions Jesus could show indignation and judgment.

Certainly in estimating Jesus' life we ought to be careful that we do not make Him out to be one certain type only. He was a Man of varied personality, and it is in the variety of His moods, expressions, and attitudes that His real humanity is most apparent.

From our text we get an impression of Jesus as a very demanding, and indeed, even a possessive person. He could not be otherwise. He had one offer

to make to people concerning their eternal salvation, and either they would have to take that offer “*as is,*” or they would have to reject the offer entirely.

There never could be any compromise about what Jesus had to tell us. He was a man with a mission from God, and His message demanded unconditional surrender to God’s terms. Whatever appeared to interfere with this message had to be ruthlessly rejected. Christ was, and still is, a divider of people. His sayings are hard precisely because they demand a decision from which there can be no turning back. Let us therefore consider the question “*What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?*” May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. A Good Intention Rebuked

Our text today becomes more meaningful if presented in its context, and so I want to begin by recalling the circumstances which called forth this saying of Jesus.

The time was somewhere near the end of Jesus’ ministry. He had passed the peak of His popularity with the people. While many people were beginning to grow suspicious of His strange-sounding teachings, great numbers still crowded to hear and see Him.

It was a time when opinion was beginning to be divided about Jesus, and all sort of rumours were being circulated about who He really was. Jesus Himself was not unaware of what people were saying about Him, but He was interested in what His disciples were thinking. And so He asked them one day, “***Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?***”¹ They reported some of the things they had heard: that He was John the Baptist come back to life, that He was Elijah reincarnated, or Jeremiah, or one of the line of prophets sent by God.

Then Jesus challenged them with the question, “***But who do you say that I am?***” Peter immediately spoke for the others, “***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***”² Jesus was undoubtedly pleased with this recognition. Then being gratified at this perception, Jesus proceeded to initiate His disciples further into the mysteries of His presence among men.

He told them of His coming sufferings and death. At this prediction the group was horrified, and Peter, always impetuous, spoke his mind. “***Far be it***

from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” he answered. But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”³

The Meaning of Life

Those were hard, yes, harsh, words of rebuke for the Lord to address to Peter. After all, Peter meant well when he expressed the hope that his beloved Master would meet with no difficulty, and certainly no tragedy. What could have been wrong about such a well-intentioned hope?

From Jesus’ point of view everything was wrong with it. For Jesus realised that without sacrifice His mission to bring people to God was a total failure. That is what was wrong with Peter’s statement — his whole basic attitude toward the purpose of Jesus’ life was at fault.

Here was Peter, a man who would soon have the responsibility of interpreting the meaning of life to others but did not understand the meaning of life himself. At that moment, Peter — and the other disciples were equally imperceptive then — was thinking that suffering and sacrifice meant unhappiness, the loss of the best that life had to offer.

But they were frightfully misguided in their attitude according to Jesus. Jesus came to tell people that human security and blessing were not conditioned by indulgence, but by service, self-denial, and love. The deepest meaning of life is hid, not in the fact that you take away from life as much as you can, but in the fact that you put into life as much of yourself as you can. This is the highest purpose that life has to offer any person, for this kind of existence is a reflection of the love and “givenness” of God.

The crowning achievement of life is its likeness to God, the Source of life. The plants, the animals, while we may speak of them as being alive, cannot ever know this supreme thrill of existence. But man is different, for man alone has been created in the image of God. The best example of a man making the most of life is Jesus Christ Himself.

He was a perfect man, and His perfection consisted in the fact that He was so completely God-like. He was the Son of God, to be sure, but He was also man. As a man He gave Himself utterly, He poured Himself out completely. That is why St. Paul in that moving section in the second chapter to the Philippians says

of Jesus that though He was God, yet in His life on earth He *“did not cling to His prerogatives as God’s equal, but stripped Himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as a mortal man.”*⁴

This lesson of His own life Jesus was teaching His disciples. If they wanted to be like Him and to point their lives in the direction He was going, they would certainly have to understand and interpret life as He did.

They would have to rid themselves of all other notions about the meaning of life, however ingrained these notions might already have become with them. They would have to submit to His demands, demands with which He disciplined Himself, as recorded in our text, *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”*²⁵ *“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”*

2. There Is No Salvation Without Sacrifice

With all our professed love for Jesus, I wonder how many of us are willing to accept His demands for living at their face value. Make no mistake about it, there can be no compromise with this saying of the Saviour. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, if you want to be a Christian, then you will have to identify your life with His discipline and hardships. You will have to accept the same responsibility for being alive that He knew. This means that as He purposed to live, not for Himself but for others, so you must purpose to live.

You must realise that no person can save himself who saves others. If Jesus had determined to handle the life which God gave Him more cautiously, He might have spared Himself.

If, for example, He had been a little more careful about what He said to the scribes and Pharisees; if He had been a little more willing to allow for human wickedness instead of insisting on absolute virtues; if He had spent less time being compassionate to the sick, the poor, and the outcasts, and had spent a little more time developing the right political contacts — why, He would never have had to die.

Jesus could have lived a long life as a popular teacher, famous for His wise sayings, and few people would have bothered Him. He might even have found time to write a book or visit Rome. But if Jesus had done any of these things, He would never have been the world’s Saviour

The Measure of Human Happiness

Don't you see, my friends, God doesn't give us life so that we can waste it, but He gives us life so that we can be useful according to His purposes. Any enjoyment we get out of life must be derived from our usefulness to life. That is why Jesus calls on those who follow Him to deny themselves and to take up his cross.

The greatest joy and power that ever entered our world came through Jesus' life and death. His was a life of poverty, a life of consideration for others, a life in which the comfort of others was always more important than His own. Even in death He was taking upon Himself the sorrows, the iniquities, and the loneliness of us all. Jesus was no failure in living. He was the greatest Lifer precisely because He was the greatest Lover and Giver.

This is the life which He came to give us more abundantly. Jesus was right, more right than we shall ever know. Life is to be found when you give yourself to it. It is surely lost to you when you try to get all you can from it. Ask yourself when you have found your greatest satisfaction from being alive. Has it not come when you were least aware of yourself?

You will know from your own experience that you have been more at peace with yourself as you hugged your own child and kissed him before tucking him in bed for the night. Have you ever felt the same emotion when looking over your bank account? The difference is obvious.

For even though you may have no bank account of which to boast, you love your child with all your heart; you are giving constantly to his life to make it strong and noble; you are convinced that his life is something in which it is worth while to invest your labours and hopes and prayers.

Getting vs. Giving

The world is certainly wrong when it insists that life is getting — getting power, fame, wealth, comfort, pleasure, and knowledge. For centuries now the world has been setting its sights on these things and getting them. For centuries now the world has been filled with deepening misery, despair, anxiety, strife, and futility. All this because the world has perverted God's order for life.

Because the world has despised being meek as a sign of weakness and has adopted power as its salvation, it has brought forth a generation of people who have overrun the world and brought terror to its people. Because the world has despised those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and has adopted expediency as its salvation, it has brought forth a generation of moral cowards who live in fear of their petty lives.

Because the world has despised those who are pure in heart and adopted selfishness as its salvation, it has seen the devil, and there has been hell to pay. Because the world has despised those who are poor in spirit and adopted scientific knowledge as its salvation, it has dug its own grave in the deeps of an atomic crater.

The Judgment on Life

The world has been gained by force, by greed, by hatred, by lust, and by pride. There are no other worlds to conquer by these forces. Like a voice of warning that comes too late, we are beginning to hear Jesus ask, ²⁶ ***“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”***

Indeed, where do we go from here with life as we have interpreted and lived it? Is there any place we can go with it? We have refused to believe Jesus, refused to follow Him, refused to deny ourselves, and refused to take up the cross. In sum, mankind has refused to love either God or man, and what has it profited us?

We have discovered that without Jesus Christ’s life of sacrifice and without His merciful cross, we have lost life and there is nothing to give in return to recover our loss. It seems that we have nothing to wait for except the inevitable Judgment. As our text says, ²⁷ ***“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”***

In His infinite patience, the Lord has not yet come in final Judgment upon the world. There is still time for us to reconsider the purpose of life. Maybe it will be true of some of us as Jesus promised in our text, ***“Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”***

3. Jesus — The Hope Of Life

If we want to be alive and see the kingdom of the Son of Man coming, if we want to save our lives and know the blessings of His presence among us, then we shall have to change our minds about where we came from, what we are doing on this earth, and where we are going.

The surest way to change your mind about these things is to come to Jesus. There is no other way. You will have to come to Him humbly and penitently confessing your own wrong, the sin of your own mishandling of life. You will have to admit to Him that you were desperately mistaken that you could find life through selfishness.

But you will have to do more than admit you were wrong about life, your life. You will also have to trust that while you can give nothing in return for your life, Jesus can. This He has already done. For you He denied Himself, for you He took up the cross. This is your salvation to believe that Jesus Christ lived for you and died for you. Here is forgiveness, not only the remission of a penalty for a life misspent but also reunion with your heavenly Father.

When you come to discover this love of God; when you understand that God gave His life for yours; when you submit and lose your life in this “givenness” and forgiveness of your Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier, then you have truly found your life.

Life will have changed in meaning for you. You will be ready for Jesus sake to deny yourself and take up your cross, because you are convinced that the way of the cross leads to God. This is the world’s greatest gain: to find life in surrender to the love of God’s cross. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:13

² Matthew 16:16

³ Matthew 16:23

⁴ J. B. Phillips, Letters to Young Churches